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# Childcare and children's health

An information sheet for parents

## The Social Baby

People used to think that babies couldn't do much, and that all they needed was physical care. Now it is more widely understood that babies need so much more than just food, clean nappies, sleep and a few toys to play with. They need, among other things:

- to be cared for by familiar caregivers who know them and with whom they feel comfortable
- warm comforting physical contact
- chances to communicate through babbling
- opportunities to learn through playing games and imitating others.

Research shows us that babies thrive on the relationships they have with their parents and others, and that these relationships are the building blocks of healthy human development. In other words, a warm, caring, positive relationship with at least one adult lays the foundation for healthy development and learning. Just as importantly, babies play an active role in those relationships from the beginning.

Babies communicate from birth, and they behave in their own individual ways even though they have much in common. It is important to learn to read their cues. Each baby has a personality and preferences, for example, whether or not they like lots of cuddling and close physical contact, the ways they signal that they are tired or hungry, and what their crying means at different times.

The recent work of brain researchers has provided hard evidence that has re-affirmed the importance of early childhood development. The brain, which is not fully developed at birth, changes as a result of both experiences and genetic influences. In other words both 'nature' and 'nurture' are crucial to brain development. The quality of the care, nutrition, stimulation and experiences a baby has affect the 'wiring' of neural pathways in the brain, which in turn influence early development and learning.

They also communicate from birth but also they have a range of other abilities. From birth on they want to find out how things work, solve problems, master their environment, and make things happen. They use all their abilities to achieve this.

The best way to learn about your baby is to pay attention. Lynne Murray and Liz Andrews, the authors of *Your Social Baby: Understanding your baby's communication from birth* (ACER, Melbourne, 2001) point out to parents that '...by watching your own baby - understanding that your baby's behaviour is not random but can tell you something important about how the baby is experiencing the world - you can be guided to give the care that is most appropriate' (page 13).

The more you know about babies the more fun and rewarding it is to witness and contribute to a baby's learning.



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