

Help Your Baby Grow

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Abstract

Expectant teens and parents of newborns are often unaware of critical developmental milestones within the first three months of birth. Education before the birth of these children is essential to the initial foundation teen parents, and parents of newborns will be building as new caregivers. Simple steps can be taken at home with minimal cost to ensure these newborns' and their parents' success and healthy development. Help Your Baby Grow is a parenting program encouraging primary connection and present parenting.

Overview of Development

Help Your Baby Grow is a hands-on, practical training program designed to address the needs of expectant teen mothers and first-time parents of newborns. The program intends to introduce and briefly explain physical, psychosocial, and cognitive developmental milestones within the first three months of life. The audience for this topic is a vulnerable one. In building this program, a holistic, universal approach was taken to consider cultural, socioeconomic, and familial differences. It is the intent of the creators to work with expectant teen mothers and first-time parents in a safe space, allowing for any questions and open dialogue about real parenting. Although many opinions exist on the "right" way to care for a newborn, Help Your Baby Grow emphasizes the importance of primary connection and presence.

The First Three Months

It is often in a cloudy haze that new parents recognize physical changes in their babies. Sleep-deprived, hormonally off balance, and overwhelmed with the new responsibility of caregiving, assuring their newborns achieve the anticipated milestones at future pediatrician or nurse practitioner check-ups is probably the furthest concern from their minds. However, knowledge is power, and new parents can be educated on basic, key developmental milestones and easy engagement activities to help their newborns acquire the anticipated growth in the expected timeline.

Fine and gross motor skill development as a newborn includes pre-reaching (extension of arms toward an object), head control (head is steady while the body is supported), upper body control (infants use their arms to push up from the surface they are lying on and raise their head, "tummy time"), and rolling (moving their body from side to back) (Gross 2019, 189).

Psychosocial development can be defined as your baby's holistic growth. Their mental, emotional, social, and spiritual development is a mix of nature versus nurture. Part of who they become is already embedded in their DNA (nature) and the environment they are raised in determines how they are nurtured. Your baby's brain continues to grow and change after birth. Imagine a maze like a video game - move an object to the left, receive an award, move to the right, and receive a penalty or loss. At this stage, connections called synapses are forming. Simplified, "Coo, cuddle, and comfort a baby, and the synapsis responding to loving behavior will endure. Scream, neglect, or strike a baby (events that are read by the brain as toxic stress), and the synapses responding to cruelty and violence will take hold" (Brink 2013, 24).

Cognitive development is defined as language processing and intake. Your baby's brain is a sponge for the first three years of life. Everything seen, touched, tasted, smelled, felt, and heard builds who they are as a human being and introduces them to the world they live in. Sharing different places of space with your baby (a park, a library, a grocery store), allows a wider view of the world. The more your baby is talked to or read to, the more remarkable "functional outcomes such as school readiness, reading ability, and vocabulary size" are (Heymann et al., 2019). While growth is not immediately apparent within three months, think of your actions as planting a seed, and, with time, the flower will sprout, grow, and bloom.

The Impact of the Home Environment on Neonatal Development

As part of Help Your Baby Grow, an overview of the impact of the home environment is discussed. New and teen parents are encouraged to tap into "reflective thinking". It is easy to react when a baby is crying and appears inconsolable. "Reflective thinking" is taking the time to pause and respond to the infant's cues. Utilizing this skill helps "for solving real-life problems" (Bhavnagri et al., 1991). Asking for help from healthy, positive people in a teen parent's life is

encouraged, including the baby's father. "Partner engagement and social support are also positively correlated with mother-infant bonding" (Takacs et al., 2020). Fathers/partners are encouraged to participate actively in infant care and engagement. "It will teach the baby that there's more than one person who loves him" (Brink 2013, 134). Postpartum fatigue for both parents is real. Caring for a newborn, dependent on you for everything, is exhausting! One of the most critical aspects of the home environment is sleep. Help Your Baby Grow does not advocate for any particular sleeping situation as long as the infant is safe. New families are encouraged to learn basic sleep education. "Parents can support healthy sleep regulation by setting a wake time, letting in daylight, keeping active during the day, and responding to their baby's cues to help keep them 'dialed down'" (Ball et al., 2020). The primary reason for sleep regulation is to assist with the infant's circadian rhythm balance.

In addition, "experiences that occur early in life influence trajectories of brain and behavior development across the lifespan" (Herzberg et al., 2024). It is easy to feel overwhelmed as a teen or first-time newborn parent, but babies can feel and react to the stress of caregivers, especially mothers. Breastfeeding is highly encouraged for at least the first six months of a baby's life. Breastfeeding is beneficial to the mother and baby's health in a myriad of ways, including lowering risks for ovarian and breast cancer rates, providing the natural release of oxytocin, which is healing on multiple levels of postpartum depression, higher cognitive competence in the baby and fewer health problems (Weaver et al., 2018). The science and research behind the benefits of breastfeeding are a stand-alone argument. However, personally speaking, as a mother of two who breastfed each child for one year, there is no other bond like it. Yes – at first, it is inconvenient and uncomfortable, sometimes even painful. But knowing it is biologically what a woman's body is intended to do minimizes the discomfort and creates a safe,

impenetrable space for you and your baby. It is also economically wise as it avoids the cost of formula.

Best Practices for New Parents

So, what can new parents do to facilitate best practices for caregiving? Part of Help Your Baby Grow includes the philosophy of K.I.S.S. (keep it sweet and simple), an interactive parenting method. "Children learn to be human through touch. Prenatally, the womb provides a constant sensation of being held" (Narvaez et al., 2019). Holding your baby, speaking softly, and engaging with eye contact builds a life-forming bond. While, this may not initially feel comfortable for some new parents, allow yourself time to experiment and for adjustment to give your baby what they need to thrive.

Ask for help! "Lean on health care providers for medical assurance; on family, friends, neighbors, babysitters, nannies, grandparents, and anyone who can be counted on to love the new family" (Brink 2013, 136). Young and new parents are growing right along with their children. Practice patience and allow yourself grace. Try to trust your intuition – biologically, you were built with the innate essentials to raise a child safely. Spend time with your child going for walks, either with a stroller or an infant pack. "Activities and exercises for the young child require adult involvement" (Pedersen et al., 2022).

Before your child is born, familiarize yourself with community resources such as food banks and diaper donations. This helps set up new teen parents for success and lowers economic stress. Help Your Baby Grow serves expectant teens and new parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Parenting insecurity is universal. Although it may feel like it, you are not alone. Positive intervention services are available, including "individualized support, parenting skills, and parent-focused components such as stress reduction or economic planning" (Kaminski et al.,

2022). Even local libraries have resources for new teens and newborn parents. Storytime is a fantastic opportunity to connect with other new parents, engage with peers, and serve as a short outing between feedings, diaper changes, and sleep.

For healthy psychosocial development, talk to your baby! It can be an observation of the weather, such as, "The sun is shining outside in the blue sky. The wind is blowing the leaves on the trees." It is encouraged to have a running dialogue with your baby. "I think it is time to change your diaper. Let's grab some wipes and maybe a change of clothes." The more conversation and description you use with your baby, the better bonding experience you can build. This technique may differ from culture to culture. Some families are more physically attentive than they are verbally attentive. Try what works for your family! In addition, continue breastfeeding. "...breastfeeding is a key factor in the facilitation of healthy brain and cognitive development in children, an issue critical to health promotion and prevention" (Luby et al., 2016).

Physical development may be fostered with supervised tummy time, engaging your baby with descriptive conversation about what may be in the room or in the area where the baby is lying. For example, "There is a blue elephant on the yellow blanket you are on." The safe, gentle, physical touch of your baby, such as holding the palm of your hand to their foot, activates reflex and builds movement coordination.

Conclusion

In closing, Help Your Baby Grow notes the importance of self-care for teens and new parents. Surrounding yourself with positive, supportive people who validate your feelings and the reality of the emotional rollercoaster of new parenting is healthy, standard, and encouraged.

Remember, "It's not personal. It's simply biology. Parents have waited for a baby, and they've been handed a mysterious not-fully-formed neonate. Patience" (Brink 2013, 26).

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