



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Can I Make My Baby Smarter?

Most parents want to do everything possible to help their child be a successful learner. Books, magazines, and TV talk shows urge parents to stimulate, to teach, to make their child better and brighter. There are flash cards, language tapes, gym classes, special schools—all designed to turn your baby into a superbaby. Wouldn't a parent who really cared be foolish to pass up these opportunities?

The central question here is what, if anything, can parents do during infancy to help their child be "smarter?" Intelligence, to a large extent, is inherited, and a person cannot surpass his or her natural endowment. However, it is never possible to know precisely what a child's inherited ability truly is.

Doing something early does not mean doing it better.

For example, so-called IQ tests measure not only ability, but also what the child has learned and experienced and how comfortable and well motivated the child is in the testing situation. Likewise, a child's school performance reflects both intelligence and acquired academic skills, as well as such attributes as attentiveness, confidence, motivation, initiative, and persistence.

Researchers make a distinction between the "genotype" (the person's genetically determined characteristics, or intellectual potential in this case) and the "phenotype" (what we can see or measure of the person's ability and expression of that ability). Environment may be said to account for the difference between the "genotype" and the "phenotype."

What this means for you as a parent is that you cannot

change your child's "genotype," but you can influence the "phenotype"—how your child uses his/her natural ability. So, does this mean that you'd better rush out and get some flashcards to begin teaching your six-month-old baby to read or do math or recognize famous works of art? For several reasons, the answer to that question is a resounding NO!

First of all, so-called superbaby approaches to early learning have not been shown to give a child any lasting advantage over children who do not have such instruction. For example, even if a child learns to read at a very early age, peers catch up quickly in elementary school. Doing something early does not mean doing it better.

Secondly, flash cards and other means of trying to fill a baby's head full of information represent a very narrow approach to education. Babies learn best by acting on their environment and by being allowed to set their own agenda, not by being passive recipients of adult-directed instruction.

Finally, parents whose major objectives are to see their baby acquire knowledge beyond what is usual for its age are at risk of creating a tense, pressured environment which will squelch their baby's natural desire to explore and learn. What can parents do? What kinds of experiences will promote healthy brain development in the first years of life? As research on brain development in humans is in its infancy, and because each baby is an individual, it is not possible to specify one, or even two, particular experiences a baby "should" have. No studies tell us that special videos, books, or television shows build the perfect brain or the perfect baby.



Giving your baby opportunities to learn through exploration is far more valuable than all the flashcards in the world.

This is not to say that you should do nothing to help your baby grow up to be a successful learner. What you can do is take a broad view of infant education and recognize the many ways in which your baby naturally learns when given the opportunity. Babies don't make the artificial distinction we adults make between play and work (thank heaven!). Play IS a baby's work! Every play experience is a learning experience. Blowing bubbles with his mouth, banging on a pan with a wooden spoon, making the bell ring on the busy box, all are important lessons in cause and effect. Splashing in water, rolling in the grass, squishing bare feet in mud are all lessons about physical properties. Giving your baby opportunities to learn through exploration is far more valuable than all the flashcards in the world.

One of the most important components of school success is effective use of language, and your baby's most important language teacher is you. Again, there is no need to "teach" your baby language, but just to talk with her and let the learning happen. Sing, babble, and read to your baby, allowing him to experience the fun of language. While changing a diaper or cuddling in the rocker, imitate your baby's sounds, creating a "conversation" long before your baby can begin to form words. Describe what you are doing, seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting—and, before you know, your child will be doing the same.

Let her experience mastery...the power to affect her environment.

Finally, one of the most significant steps you can take to help your child become a successful learner is to let her experience mastery. Your baby's first experiences of mastery will be when you respond to his cues and signals. Go to him promptly when he cries, laugh with him when he makes a funny sound, give him peace and quiet when he turns his head away after a lively bout of play. Allow him to see that he has the power to affect his environment. Let her experience mastery with the object world, too. Put a toy just out of reach, and let her feel the satisfaction of scooting over to it, grabbing it, and exploring it to her heart's content.

Don't take away that wonderful feeling of control by putting the toy TOO far away or by getting it for her.

Through your relationship with your baby, you have the power to help him develop a love of exploration, the joy of language, and the belief in his own ability to succeed. What more could you do to prepare your child to fulfill his intellectual potential? As a parent, you should focus on supporting the healthy development of your baby. Promote positive experiences and protect your baby from significant negative ones. Keep your baby healthy and happy, feed your baby well, and respond to his or her needs for love, comfort, and play.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

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