

How Are the Children? Babies Brain Connections Last a Lifetime

Every infant is not just born to parents, but is also born into a community of extended family, friends and neighbors, caregivers and co-workers, service providers, spiritual congregations, and commerce. Everyone has a part to play in helping babies grow strong and healthy.

Like constructing a house, brains are built upon a strong foundation. This starts before birth, and is very important during the first three years of life. Brain cells are “raw” materials—much like lumber is a raw material in building a house. A child’s experiences and interactions with all the people in their lives—parents, family, childcare and preschool teachers, community members—help build the structure, put in the wiring, and paint the walls.

At birth, a baby’s brain contains 100 billion nerve cells, roughly as many as there are stars in the Milky Way, and almost all the neurons the brain will ever have. The brain starts forming early in the pregnancy, about three weeks after conception. In the months before birth, the brain produces trillions more neurons and connections between the brain cells. After birth, as the growing infant experiences family life and their surrounding world, the nerve cells mature, and more connections are formed. It is these brain connections that allow babies to learn new information, regulate their emotions, and control their behavior, both as young children and throughout their lives.

What role do parents play in brain development? Parents are babies’ first teachers and are one of the most important parts of the brain developmental equation. The love that parents feel towards their babies and the kind of attention they give them—touching, holding, comforting, rocking, singing, and talking to them—provide the best kind of stimulation for their growing brains and bodies, and for their emotional security.

All new parents experience changes in family and work routines, lack of sleep, and have questions or concerns about their babies’ growth and development—that’s normal. And although every child experiences some kind of stress, stress can become ‘toxic’ when a child has frequent or prolonged experiences like abuse, neglect, or extreme poverty without adult support. Children who have overcome hardships almost always have had at least one stable and responsive relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult who provided consistent and caring support, and helped them build effective coping skills.

How can we help? **Learn about babies and what they need to thrive.** Babies do well in calm, unhurried environments. Taking time with ordinary care activities helps to promote bonding and loving interactions. Remember that infants cannot be ‘spoiled’—holding, comforting, and responding quickly to their cries and needs help them feel more secure and ready to explore the world. **Develop warm, caring relationships with young families** and offer your time and wisdom; encourage parents to seek help to manage their stress or concerns. **Support policies that contribute to preventive health care for pregnant women and their young children.** The foundations of lifelong health begin with the well-being of the future mother before and

during pregnancy. Programs that help meet children's early nutritional needs also promote healthy brain development and overall well-being.

Learn about family resources in our community. Home-visiting services, like Maine Families and Community Compass navigators, support and value new parents, and are free for all families. Visitors are trained in answering questions about babies' development and knowing what programs or resources are available in your town or community. Ask about playgroups, parent-child groups, and Zoom parents' support groups. Health care providers are also good sources of support, information, and referrals. **Support state legislation** that offers education and job training opportunities for parents, and that builds a strong early childhood workforce and access to affordable and quality childcare programs for all families.

Resources for you:

- Go to **Healthy Peninsula** at healthypeninsula.org or the Peninsula Birth to 5 Facebook page for the **Family Resource Guide** and the **Early Childhood Newsletter** with local activities and resources
- **Maine Families** mainefamilies.org 207/667-5304 (ext 225)
- **Community Compass** communitycompassdowneast.org 207/522-7983
- Right from the Start Maine rightfromthestartmaine.org/priorities/

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