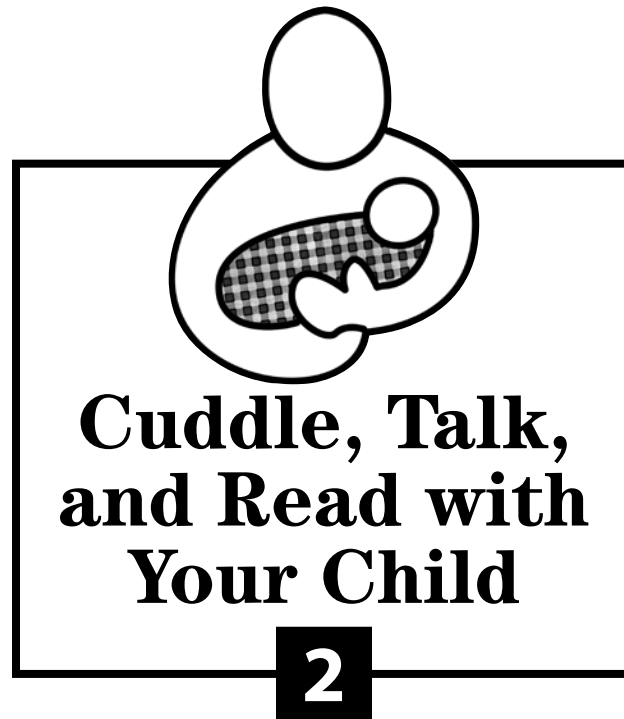


# Keys to Great Parenting

*Fun and Learning with Your Baby or Toddler*

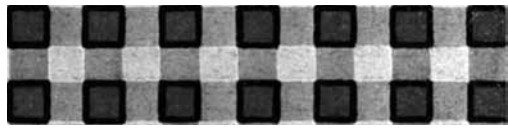


Cooperative Extension Service  
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# Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child

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**B**abies and toddlers love it when you hug and cuddle them and smile at them. They also love you to listen, talk, and read to them. Doing both at the same time, such as cuddling while reading simple storybooks, develops a warm bond between you and your child.

The importance of this key—***Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child***—is strongly supported by recent research. A loving touch for your child while listening and talking in a respectful way is needed for your child's best brain development, lifelong growth, and success.



## Smiling and Touching

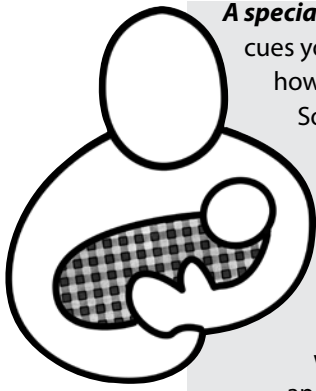
Smiles and affectionate touch, such as cuddling and stroking, show your love. They also strengthen your child's brain, unlocking his almost unlimited abilities.

Not paying attention to a baby's wants and needs is a mistake. A recent study of neglected young children found that their brains were at least 20 percent smaller than the brains of normal children of the same age.

Affection also builds your child's trust in you and other people. Your little one learns self-confidence and security from your attention and caring. He becomes better able to make friends, try out new ideas, and explore the world around him.

Are you worried that holding and touching your baby will spoil him? Don't! It is impossible to show too much love. Do not hold back your affection in these important early years, and show older brothers and sisters how to gently love, touch, and play with your baby or toddler.

- Gently hug and cuddle your baby. He learns right away to know your special touch and smell.
- Look into his eyes and smile at him. He likes to smile and gaze into your eyes when you hold him close.
- Play touching games with his hands and feet, such as "Pat-a-Cake" and "This Little Piggy Went to Market." Gently move his legs up and down with your hands while chanting a nursery rhyme. He will wiggle and squirm with delight.
- Stay close by as he crawls and walks short distances to explore his world. He feels safe and trusting when he can see you calmly watching.



**A special note:** Be sure to follow the cues your baby gives you about how he likes to be handled. Some babies prefer not to be touched a lot. They may squirm away or cry when parents try to hold them close. But they still need to know that they are loved. Smiling while looking into their eyes and gentle stroking are good ways for parents to show affection for those babies who prefer less touching.

## Talking

Did you know that babies begin to learn about language even before birth? Many mothers sing and read poems aloud during the last three or four months of pregnancy because they know that babies can hear their mother's voice during that time.

Once children are born, parents need to talk and listen long before their babies can speak in words. They voice their wants and needs and practice language with cries, coos, and babbles.

- Keep your baby close to you and softly talk to her. Tell her about yourself and the rest of her family. You can explain to her about a book you are reading or what you are going to shop for at the store.
- Repeat back to her the cooing and babbling sounds she makes. Imitating her sounds is fun! You also show her that you like her experiments with language.
- Avoid sharing your worries and troubles with your baby or toddler. Save them for an understanding adult. Even newborns sense adult feelings and may become anxious.

## Listening

Pay attention to your child's sounds and movements, because listening is important. The give-and-take of listening and talking together is the beginning of conversation. You teach your child skills such as taking turns, getting along with others, using language, and focusing attention.

At the same time, your infant or toddler teaches you about his likes and dislikes; his feelings and needs such as affection, delight, discomfort, hunger, frustration, and anger; his special sounds, movements, and expressions; and his ideas.

- Pay close attention to your baby's or toddler's sounds and words.
- Watch his body language. Try to put yourself in your child's place and to understand what he is saying with his movements and facial expressions.
- Tell him in short, clear sentences what you think he is saying. Ask him if you are right, and watch for his response. For example, say to him "What are you telling me? Is your diaper wet?" Toddlers may nod, point, or try to say a word. You then can reply in the same clear style with words such as "OK, let's change you so you'll be dry."

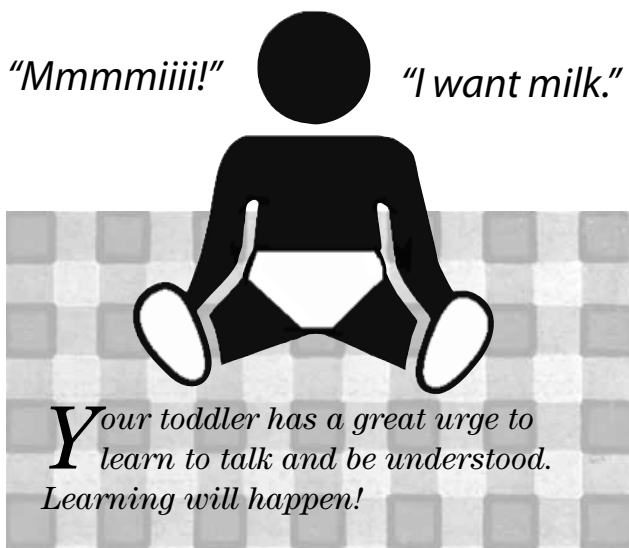
A younger baby may not be able to directly answer you, but at 3 or 4 months, he may look at you intently or wiggle excitedly. It will not be long before he will begin to learn how to respond to your questions.

You can tell him what the two of you can do together or how you will solve a problem: You might say "We'll be home in a few minutes. Then we'll have lunch." You are teaching him that his feelings matter to you. He will be secure in his small world and can relax.

## Answering

When your toddler begins to use words you recognize, it is important to answer her. Repeat her words in short sentences. She needs to hear and imitate correct sounds. For example, she may point to her cup of milk saying, "Mmmmmiii!" You could say "You would like your milk, wouldn't you?" In that way, you help her hear the correct sound and meaning of the word.

- Listen to your toddler patiently and use her words in sentences again and again. Eventually, she will begin to use the words correctly.
- Stay relaxed and good humored. Your toddler has a great urge to learn to talk and be understood. Learning will happen!
- Speak a little more slowly than you usually do, and say words clearly. Use short sentences.
- Make sure you have your toddler's attention when you are talking with her. When she focuses on your eyes, she is more likely to listen carefully.



## Reading

Read with your child as much as you can. Reading is the most important learning activity you can do with your child. Recent studies show that reading helps young children become good students later on. Your baby or toddler will love hearing the same stories over and over. You do not need to do workbook drills. Story reading works better and is much more fun!

- Cuddle your baby or toddler on your lap or close beside you as you read. Both of you will enjoy the feeling of closeness.
- Select books that are in tune with his age and interests.
- Talk with him about the pictures and words in the book, even if he does not talk enough to answer you. One day you will notice that he joins the conversation.
- Here are reading suggestions for different ages. Remember that since all babies are different, they may not fit your baby exactly at the age given:

### **0 to 4 months:**

Find stiff cardboard books with very simple pictures, strong color contrasts, and few words. If your baby is young, support him against your body as you read. Hold the book about 7 or 8 inches from his eyes. Name the objects in the pictures.

### **5 to 8 months:**

Find soft, washable vinyl or cloth books that can withstand chewing, scrunching, and shaking. Give your baby a toy to hold and chew while you look at the book with him. Ask him to point to the object when you name it. As he starts to crawl, let him push or carry the book from place to place.

### **9 to 12 months:**

Babies begin to use their thumbs and fingers to hold books. Stiff cardboard books with pictures of familiar objects are best. As your baby turns into a toddler and he starts to walk, let him carry his books around with him and plop down to look at them from time to time. As before, when the two of you read together, ask him to point to objects in the books when you name them. Help him learn to turn pages the right way.

*Select books that are in tune with your child's age and interests. Reading is the most important learning activity you can do with your child.*



**13 to 18 months:**

Toddlers may begin to say single words or two words at a time. They like to hear simple stories about children their own age, pets, or other things they know, and they like to name pictures in their books. Tell them simple, interesting facts, such as the sounds animals make or the colors of objects in the books. Toddlers also like stories with short phrases that repeat, and they like to help you repeat the phrases.

**19 to 36 months:**

Children can begin to handle books with paper pages. They like interesting pictures that tell a short story and have only a small number of words on each page. They may spend a long time looking at pictures and asking questions.

## Scribbling, Drawing, and Writing

After your child has stopped putting everything in her mouth (usually around 12 months) give her plenty of plain paper and large crayons for scribbling. It is lots of fun for her to try out different colors and lines. Scribbling is also important because it is the beginning of writing.




- Keep plain, large sheets of paper and jumbo-size crayons where your child can reach them.
- Find a safe, smooth surface for her to draw on. You might want to put something smooth underneath the paper in case she draws off the edge.
- Your child likes you to watch her scribble pictures. Say to her, "Tell me about your drawing!" or "Look at those curving red lines! What other colors would you like to try?" These questions encourage her to use words to tell you about the pictures in her mind.
- Toddlers, preschoolers, and older children like to see their drawings displayed on walls and the refrigerator. It helps them learn that their ideas and work mean a lot to you.

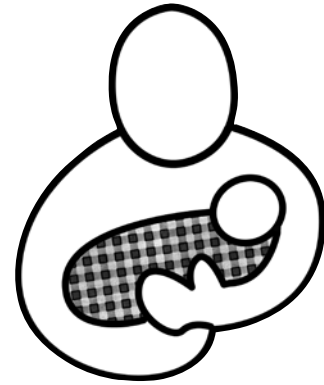
## Rhyming and Singing

Rhymes, nonsense sounds, and simple songs are fun for both adults and young children. The first three years are the "window of opportunity" for your little one to learn about tones and rhythm. Research suggests that enjoying music at an early age helps develop lifelong benefits for learning, such as listening, language, movement, memory, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills.

- If you can, remember the nursery rhymes and other simple poems and songs you enjoyed as a child. You can find rhymes, poems, and songs in books at your library or buy them inexpensively.
- Sing or recite these songs and chants. You do not have to be a great singer. These rhymes and the love and attention you put into them appeal to babies from the moment they are born.



*Television and other video media are not substitutes for loving parents, other family members, and friends.*



## Television, Computer Games, and Movies

Television and other video media are not substitutes for loving parents, other family members, and friends. They do not explain ideas and have feelings like real people do. Nobody can smile, speak, and sing with your child like you can. Also, some of what is on television and in computer games and movies is too violent for young children. It upsets them and teaches them that violence is OK.

- Use television only once in a while. Also avoid having it on in the background.
- Carefully select the television shows and videos that your young child sees.
- Be firm with your toddler and other family members or friends about turning off the television if a program is not good for your child to watch.
- When you find a video or television program that shows happy people, colorful pictures, rhythmic music, and ideas your toddler can understand, why not watch it with him? Sing or clap hands with him and have fun together.
- Ask other adults who spend time with your child to talk, read, sing, and play with him instead of watching television. Ask them to avoid using television as a baby-sitter.

*Your child is a miracle! By cuddling, talking, and reading, you help your child's brain grow stronger. You are your child's first and most important teacher, and your love makes all the difference in the world.*

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This publication provides information about good parenting. Readers are encouraged to use it for education but not as a substitute for other professional advice.

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## **Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child**

This publication is No. 2 in a seven-part series on fun and learning with your baby or toddler, an educational program based on seven keys to unlocking your child's wonderful abilities:

- 1 Care for Yourself
- 2 Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child
- 3 Know How Your Child Develops
- 4 Be Playful with Your Child
- 5 Show Your Child the World
- 6 Teach Self-Control
- 7 Practice Health and Safety

