



# What You Can Do to Support Babies' Brain Development From 6 to 12 Months

## Language

Most babies learn language as a result of hearing others speak and having “conversations” with parents and caregivers. These interactions, over time, shape the developing language areas of the brain. Before 6 months, babies can recognize familiar words, but don’t understand many of them. The link between sound and meaning begins in the second 6 months. When you talk to babies, give them plenty of time to respond with their own babbling sounds such as “baba,” “dada,” and “madabagada.”

### **There’s no need to “teach” babies to talk.**

Talking with the babies as you interact with them throughout the day is all they need to begin making the connection between sounds and words.

### **Cuddle up and share stories with babies.**

Follow the babies’ lead. If he wants to keep returning to a favorite page, no problem. There is no right or wrong way to read to a baby. Don’t worry about finishing the picture book—babies rarely make it cover to cover. What’s most important is that babies love exploring books.

### **Learn and use some words from a baby’s home language if it is different from yours.**

Even using a few important words (like *hungry*, *tired*, *mother*, *father*, etc.) can help the baby feel “at home.”

## Thinking Skills

Babies learn by repeating actions over and over again. These repeated “experiments” with objects and people help babies learn about their physical and social environments. For example, when a baby repeatedly drops her spoon, and you repeatedly pick it up, she learns about gravity. She also learns that she can rely on you to help her learn and, hopefully, that you enjoy these shared games.

***Provide interesting things for babies to touch and explore.*** All toys must all be safe for babies to put into their mouths as this is where many objects end up!

***Offer babies containers that they can dump and fill.*** The process of dumping over and over (and over) again is a way that babies learn about objects and how things work.

***Expect some messes.*** Many babies love to touch their food and explore different textures with their fingers.

***Make time to read each day.*** Provide chunky board books, fabric, or rubber books that babies can play with and put into their mouths.



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## Movement

Between 6 and 12 months, the areas of the brain that control trunk and leg muscles are more mature, which helps babies achieve significant physical milestones:

- sitting alone at around 7 months,
- crawling around 8–10 months,
- pulling to stand and cruising while holding onto something around 10–11 months, and
- taking first steps alone around 12 months.

However, the age at which babies learn these skills varies widely. For example, some babies walk as early as 9 months, and some babies don't walk until 15 months—but both babies can be developing normally. This progression of physical (or *motor*) development is influenced by the baby's developing brain.

**Encourage, but don't rush, physical development.** Allow babies to develop at their own pace. (If you have concerns about a baby's physical development, talk to his parents and suggest they talk with their health care provider.)

**Make sure your environment has enough safe challenges that encourage babies to explore through movement.** Make a small obstacle course out of pillows or cushions to climb over, around, and through.

**Dance to music.** Move in different ways. Hold them and sway or gently bounce to the beat. When they are big enough to balance on their legs, hold onto their hands as they move themselves.

## Social-Emotional Development

Positive social interactions are critical for a baby's growing brain. The way you touch, hold, feed, talk to, and look at a baby all provide important information to her developing brain. When you read babies' cues and respond to their individual needs, you build feelings of trust and security essential for healthy brain development.

Keep an eye out for "separation anxiety" in babies between 6 and 9 months. This is when babies recognize and show preferences for their primary caregivers (usually mom and dad) and protest separating from them. This is a very normal stage of development and does not reflect their feelings about you.

**Tune in to the individual needs of each baby.** Provide comfort when they are distressed. Try to interact with each baby one on one whenever possible during the day. It is important for each infant to feel cared for and to feel special.

**Have fun with babies.** Babies are careful observers. They know when you are happy, sad, or angry. When you show pleasure as you interact with the babies in your care, they see you enjoy being with them and build a strong connection between the two of you that supports healthy brain development.

**Learn about each family's culture and child-rearing beliefs and values.** Understanding a family's approach to parenting can help you support its baby's development while in your care. Feeling safe and secure in your care will help build strong brains.