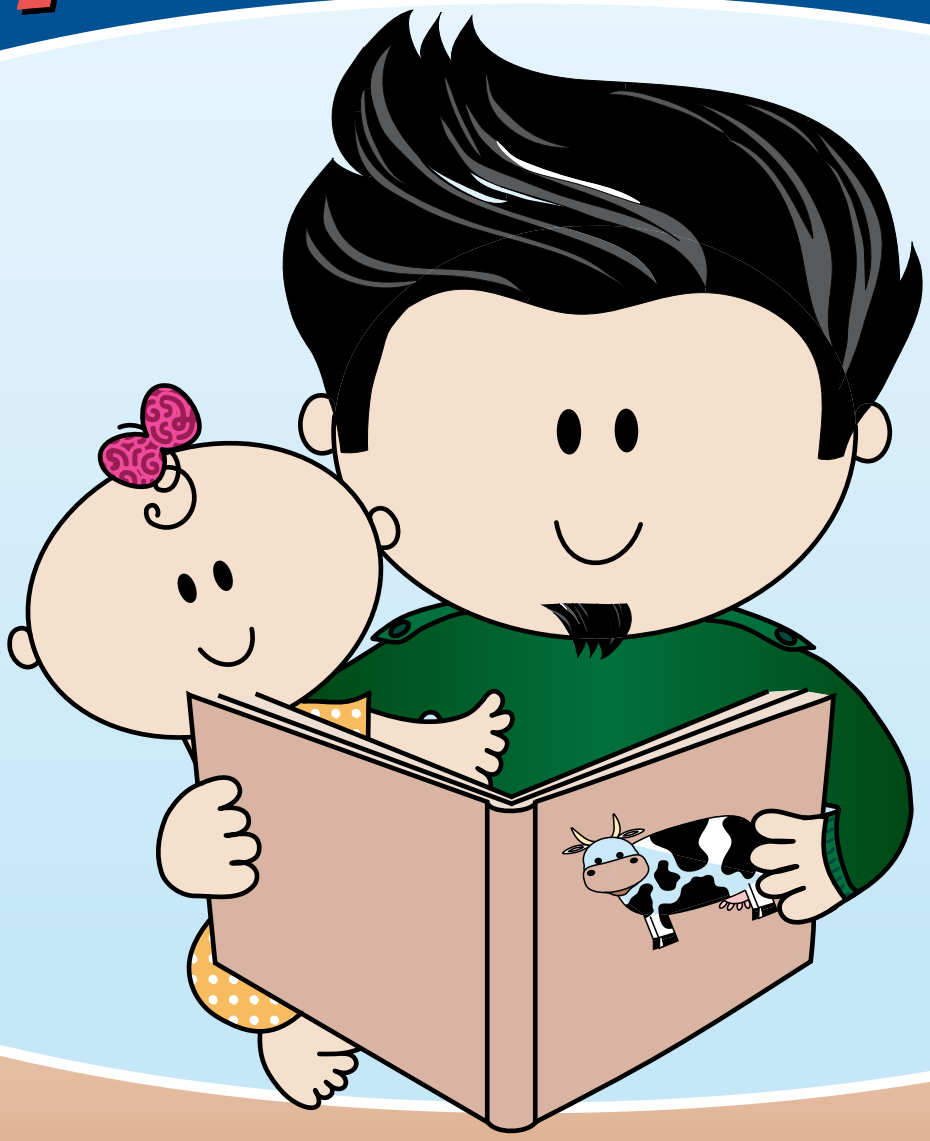
Build Your Skills
Shape Your Future
Kingston Literacy & Skills

As Your Child Learns



Family & Early Literacy

123 ABC

As Your Child Learns

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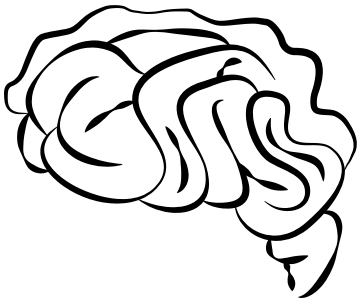
About the Brain



A baby's brain has already started to develop before they are born. We used to think that a child inherited their potential from their family genes. Now we know that there is a lot more to brain development than family genes. In fact, genes have influenced only the basic wiring.

Research has proven that every experience a baby has affects the way the baby's brain will develop.

Amazingly, at birth the brain is already made up of millions of neurons and the baby's brain is **still** developing.

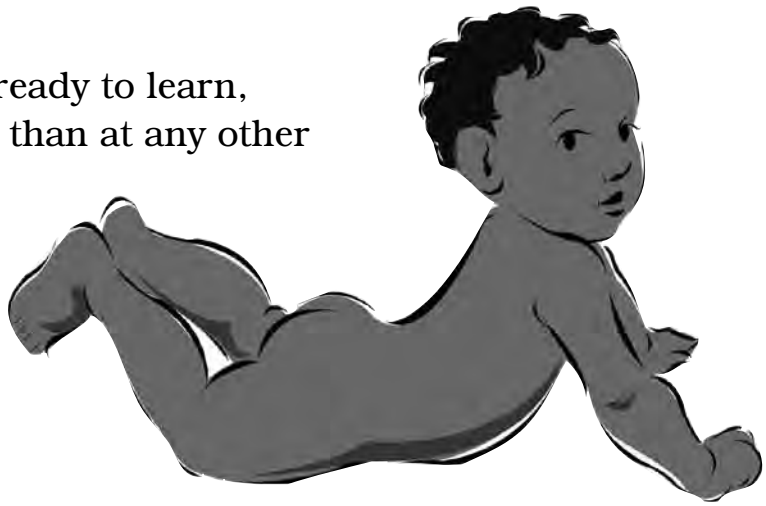
Neurons are like wires or pathways. To remember something that is being learned, the neuron has to be opened and a pathway created.

When a person experiences something new, a temporary pathway is created along the neuron. In other words, the wire is temporarily connected. If the experience is repeated a few times, the pathway stays open and the learning becomes permanent. If the experience is not repeated, the pathway closes or the wire is disconnected.

At birth, pathways already exist in the brain that make the heart beat and the lungs breathe. During the first few months, many millions of new pathways are formed by the experiences the baby has every day. The more an experience is repeated, the stronger the pathways become.

A baby is born with a natural need to learn. They are like a sponge that fills with water. They will soak up new skills as long as we give them plenty to choose from.

A baby's brain is ready to learn, probably more so than at any other time in their life.



A baby's brain is ready to make connections. At no time in a person's life is the brain more able to make connections or pathways. In fact, during the early years, millions of 'wires' are connected together in the child's brain. Sometimes this is called a 'map' of neural pathways or connections.

These are the 'pathways' or 'wiring connections' that will make it possible for them to hear, see, move and feel. Because of this, the sights and sounds that the baby is exposed to affect the way they will talk.

Special groups of wires join together to help your baby hear sounds. The sounds they hear are the ones their brains learn. The baby's brain becomes 'programmed' like a computer to respond to these sounds.

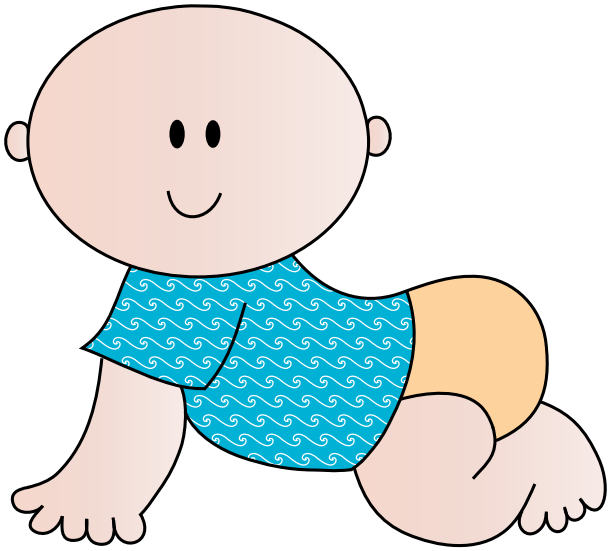
Did you know?

- *The wiring in a baby's brain is programmed to respond only to those sounds found in the baby's environment... so, English babies do not know Chinese sounds and Chinese babies do not know English sounds.*
- *It is easier for a baby to learn a new language and more difficult for an adult to learn a new language.*
- *Adults have a harder time learning new things because the 'wires' need more repeated experiences to make the connection or open the pathway.*

About the Newborn

(Birth – 1 month)

A newborn baby is one of the most incredible wonders. The newborn comes into the world equipped to respond to its surroundings.



Language is the basis of all communication, and so it is the most important thing for a child to learn. A child's language development is affected by early experiences with language, how the child hears and the learning environment a child lives in.

The first steps to learning language begin before the baby is born. Babies listen to the sound of their mother's and father's voices while they are still in the womb.

When a baby is born, all the wires for hearing are not connected. In other words, their hearing map is not made. The people around them fill in the blank page. The groups of wires in the brain are waiting for a job to do. These groups of wires each work on a different sound.

The newborn communicates in the following ways:

- First, a newborn watches and listens. A newborn looks at their mother's face and listens to her voice when they are being held.

- In the early weeks, crying is the only way the newborn can indicate that they are uncomfortable, unhappy, tired, lonely, too cold, too hot or hungry.

- At a few weeks, the newborn begins to coo and smile.

- At one month, the newborn can hear sounds from different languages.

- Newborns will make eye contact.

- Newborns learn that if they make their wishes known, someone will respond.

- Newborns communicate their needs by fussing, crying, kicking, etc.

The World of the Newborn

Newborns are totally dependent on adults when they are born. Therefore, babies need to be looked after by caring people who will do their best to provide a loving and safe environment.

Adults can help the newborn communicate by:

- holding and touching the baby
- speaking to the baby
- singing to the baby
- reading to the baby
- providing music for the baby
- cooing and smiling back at the baby
- keeping their tones soothing when speaking to the baby
- making eye contact with the baby

Did you know?

- *The newborn will quickly learn new ways to communicate.*
- *The world of communication for the newborn revolves around the face and voice.*

About the Infant

(1 month – 18 months)

Throughout this stage, the infant is exploring many different ways of communicating. They hear and see more, and as a result, begin to play with verbalizing their needs.

Throughout this stage, the infant's level of communication evolves in the following ways:

- Babies use body language to talk to us.
- The way babies move, the faces they make, the way they look away, are all ways babies 'talk' to their mothers or fathers.
- They learn that if they cry, someone will hold them until they feel happy, or if they are hungry, someone will feed them.
- Babies will react to speech more than anything else. They pick up the meaning of what a person says by watching faces, as well as watching mouths and listening to the tone of voice.

- At 6 months, your baby will begin to babble and enjoy pictures in books.
- At 6 months, they begin to focus on the sounds of the language spoken by the people around them.
- At 9 months, babies start to copy the language that they hear.
- The more times a baby hears a word, the sooner they will learn to say it. Hearing 'live' language produces this effect; TV does not.
- Words have to be used at the same time as doing or seeing actions for the baby to learn, or it is just a noise to them, not a word.
- At 10–12 months, babies start to make longer sentences of abstract sounds. Often their chatter sounds like what a scribble would be if they were writing.

- By 12 months, a baby's hearing map is made.
- At 1 year, a baby is beginning to link words to what the words mean.
- At 1 year, a baby will be making and using the lip sounds of 'm', 'p', 'b' and 'w'.

- Infants' early words are mostly to do with objects or actions they know, such as "bye-bye", "night-night", "up", "down", "all gone".
- At 18 months, infants are still relying on an adult to help them get their messages across.
- Infants do not worry if a word has more than one meaning. They think that a name refers to a whole object, not parts of it: for example, they learn the word "cup" but do not learn the word "handle" until later.
- An infant keeps their word learning simple.
- An infant learns words slowly to begin with, but by 18 months they learn new words at a fast rate.

The World of the Infant

At this stage, infants want to move around and interact with the world around them. There is a great deal of development that takes place throughout a child's infancy. The activities that encourage communication differ depending upon the age and stage of the infant.

Adults can help the infant's level of communication to develop by:

- Singing to the infant
- Playing clapping and other rhythm and rhyming games with the infant
- Speaking to the infant
- Speaking during all activities done with the infant
  Example: *changing diapers, bathing, etc.*
- Letting the infant hear all kinds of sounds
  Example: *toys that make sounds*
- Holding and touching the infant
- Reading to the infant
- Providing music in the infant's environment
- Playing with the infant, particularly easy singing and moving games: such as peek-a-boo, pat-a-cake, this little piggy, etc.
- Listening to and copying the infant's sounds
- Looking at and copying the infant's facial expressions

- Paying attention to the unique ways the infant uses to communicate
- Providing a stimulating environment and using simple language to identify elements of that environment

- Taking daily walks with the infant
- Responding with words when the infant points to an object or a person
- Showing the infant different objects and people, and saying the names
- Providing a safe and secure environment
- Practising 'conversations' like the following:

"What is this?" (Point to a picture of a cow.)

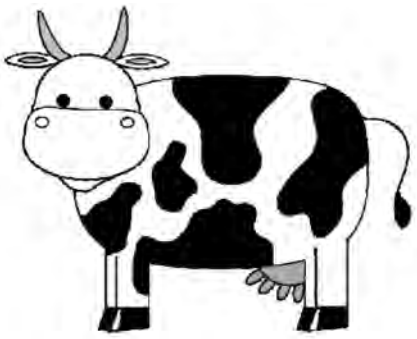
No answer.

"We saw one at the farm." No answer. "It mooed." No answer. "It's a cow."

"A cow?"

"Yes. It is a cow like the one we saw at the farm. It says moo."

"Moo!"



Did you know?

- *An infant learns from their parent's voice if the parent is happy or sad even before they know what the words mean.*
- *A parent may need to be concerned if baby, at:*

0–3 months	… Does not turn when you speak
	… Does not return coos
4–6 months	… Does not respond to "no"
	… Does not respond to a change in tone of voice
	… Does not make speech sounds such as 'p,' 'b,' 'm'
7–12 months	… Does not recognize words for common items
	… Does not turn when you call his/her name
	… Does not copy speech sounds
	… Does not use a sound other than crying to get attention
1–2 years	… Does not point to pictures in a book
	… Does not understand simple questions such as, "Where's teddy?"

If a parent has any concerns in this regard, they should consult their family doctor or the local health unit.

About the Toddler

(18 months – 3 years)

At this stage of the child's development, the imagination is flourishing and they start to assert their independence. This is also a stage of socialization outside of the family.

There is a huge range of development throughout this stage in terms of the toddler's ability to communicate. In fact, the toddler learns to speak.

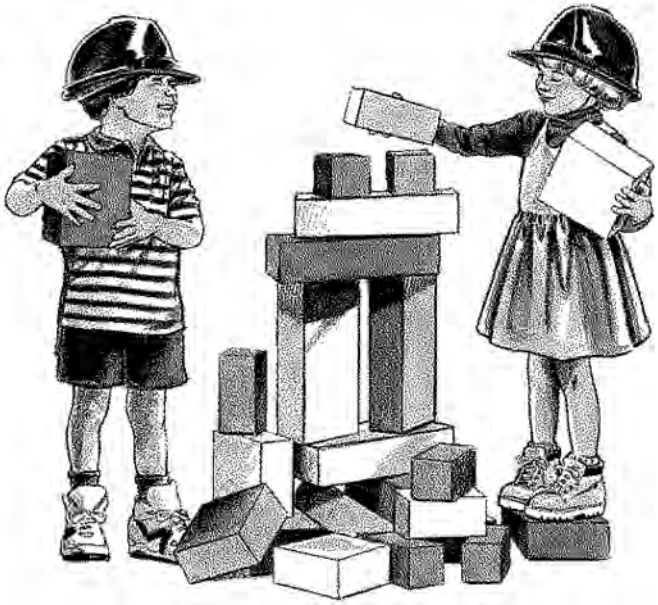
Throughout this stage, the toddler's level of communication evolves in the following ways:

- Once a toddler has learned to put two words together, it will not be long before they make sentences.
- At age 2, the toddler uses the tongue tip sounds 'n,' 't,' 'd' and 's'.
- Toddlers understand that the meaning of words change if you put the words together in a different way:

  Example: *"Daddy is talking to Mommy."*
  "Mommy is talking to Daddy."

- Usually by age 2, toddlers know 1,000–2,000 words, and start to put words together
  Example: *"all gone," "bottle juice."*
- At 2½–3 years, the toddler is able to use past or present tense (walk or walked) and number (brick or bricks).

Keep in mind that toddlers do not all talk at the same age.



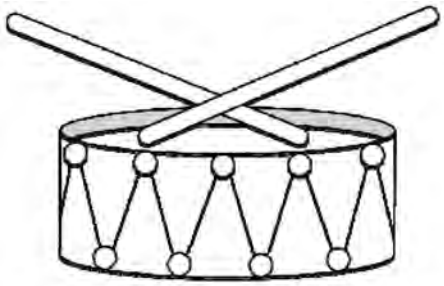
- A toddler may start to use words that form questions, like "would," "who" and "how".
- Toddlers enjoy nursery rhymes and poems. Rhymes help them to remember words.
- A toddler may fill in the words of a story or poem they know.

- The toddler begins written communication by scribbling on paper.
- The toddler begins to draw.

The World of the Toddler

At this stage of development the toddler wants to talk, play, pretend, copy, socialize and be independent. There is a great deal of development throughout the toddler stage. The activities that encourage communication differ depending upon the age and stage of the toddler.

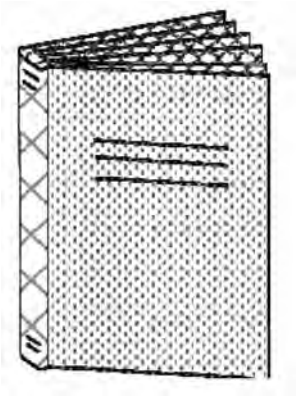
Adults can help the toddler's level of communication by:



- singing to the toddler
- playing rhyming and other rhythm games
- speaking to the toddler
- repeating words and affirming the toddler's words
  Example: *"That's right. It is a train."*

- using short sentences
- repeating the toddler's two-word phrase with a complete sentence
  Example: *"Want cookie."*
  "Would you like a cookie?"
- speaking slowly
- speaking clearly
- encouraging the correct use of "I," "me," "you," "your"
- holding and touching the toddler
- providing music in the toddler's environment

- reading to the toddler
- having a variety of books on hand
- creating new stories with the toddler
- using pictures to teach the toddler the names of things
- answering the toddler's questions
- asking the toddler questions



- explaining how things work
- taking the toddler to see new people and places
- walking with the toddler
- stopping to talk about things that interest the toddler while on a walk

- providing positive socialization opportunities
- playing with the toddler
- using a variety of games with the toddler
- encouraging quiet play
- encouraging artistic expression
  Example: *colouring, drawing*

Did you know?

A parent may need to be concerned if at 2–3 years the toddler:

- *cannot understand different meanings*
  Example: ***up or down***
- *cannot follow two requests*
  Example: ***"Pick up the books and give them to me."***
- *cannot put two or three words together*
- *cannot name common objects*

If a parent has any concerns in this regard, they should consult their family doctor or the local health unit.

***

A parent must be careful to give their child a chance to talk. Do not always answer for them. Otherwise, they will soon find out that they get what they need without trying to say the words for themselves.

***

'Play' is doing an activity your child enjoys. It helps language development in the following ways:

- *play makes children listen and talk about what they are doing*
- *play often makes children repeat things*
- *play helps children communicate with others*
- *play uses different senses — touch, smell, hearing, taste, sight*

About the Child

(3 – 7 years)

At this stage of development, the child's imagination continues to grow, and because the child has developed a larger vocabulary, they are able to verbally express their individuality. With the combination of the more developed fine motor skills and the child's new level of vocabulary, we see the beginning of playing with writing. The child continues to socialize in more expanded circles.

There is a huge range of development throughout this stage in terms of the child's ability to communicate.

Throughout this stage, the child's level of communication evolves in the following ways:

- By the age of 3, children use words:
  - to explain what they mean
  - to get what they want
  - to answer questions
  - to make up stories and games
  - to count
  - to repeat rhymes, poems, songs, etc.

- By the age of 3, the child uses throaty and liquid sounds, such as 'ing', 'k', 'g', 'h', 'l'.

- By the age of 4, the child uses hissy, noisy sounds, such as 'f', 'v', 'sh'.

- By the age of 5, the child uses blends of letter sounds, such as 'cr', 'cl', 'th' and 'sc,' and combines other letter sounds with r, such as 'ar', 'rah', 'er'.

- By the time the child is 7 years old, they will know a lot more about the world and their thinking will be more mature. The things they say will include ideas about the future and the past, reason, what might have been and what might happen (prediction).

- They will be able to say words correctly and understand the meaning.

- Their grammar will be better and they will know many words.

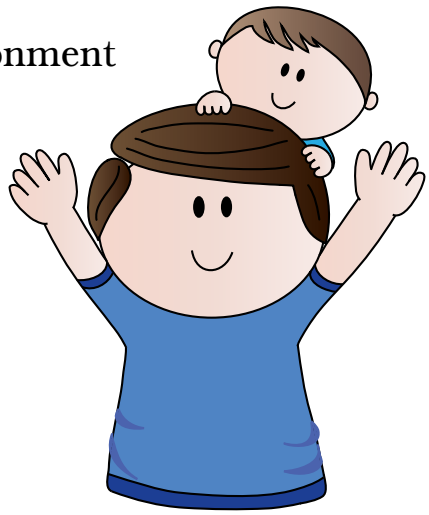
- At about 7 years of age, children begin to read and write more clearly.

- At this age, children enjoy thinking about words — words that are the same, and differences in the way one can say things to make jokes and riddles.

The World of the Child

At this stage, the child wants to be active and creative at home as well as at school. Parents and adults can help the child's level of communication to develop by:

- singing to the child
- holding and touching the child
- providing music in the child's environment
- speaking to the child
- using new words
- answering the child's questions
- asking the child questions
- explaining how things work



- taking the child places to see new people and things
- providing positive socialization opportunities
- providing many opportunities to play
- playing with the child
- reading to the child

- letting the child choose books to read
- listening to the child read aloud
- encouraging the child to re-read things
- taking the child to the library
- building a personal library of books in the child's room
- making books with the child
- walking daily with the child
- providing art materials
  Example: *crayons, paints, coloured paper*

- keeping a dress-up box
- encouraging the child to print and to draw
- displaying the child's work on the fridge, etc.
- providing opportunities to explore crafts
  Example: *beadwork*
- providing play dough

- helping with any work brought home from school
- beginning to be active in maintaining a relationship with the child's teacher
- keeping open and clear communication with the child's teacher
- encouraging the child to read any information that comes home from school
- showing the child different kinds of writing
  Example: *shopping list, letters, etc.*
- letting the child create cards for different occasions
- encouraging the child to write their name
- allowing writing to be messy at first
- accepting creative spelling
- letting the child write lists for household chores
- setting aside time daily for writing

Did you know?

- *It is language that makes humans different from all other species. You should help your child learn that language so that they will become a confident adult.*
- *A parent should be concerned if the child, at:*

3–4 years … Does not answer 'who', 'what', 'where' questions
… Cannot be understood by people outside the family
… Cannot use four-word sentences
… Cannot say simple sounds (phonemes)

If a parent has any concerns in this regard, they should consult their family doctor or the local health unit.