

4 Things Your Baby Needs to Learn in the First 2 Years of Life

December 2, 2014 - [About Kids](#), [Cycles](#), [Parenting](#)

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“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” (Frederick Douglas) The edification of our children starts on day one. The building of strong children begins from conception, long before we ever look into the eyes of our little one. There is nothing so important in any of our lives as the responsibility to act in ways that build strong children. Built into Frederick Douglas’s statement above is a challenge to ensure that no matter how much repair we ourselves might need, we should do all we can to stop perpetuating the cycle of broken men and women and promote health, safety and strength in our own children. We ourselves, our children, and society as a whole, will be strengthened as we head this challenge.

From the moment our children are conceived they are influenced by our thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Even before they are born we are developing our children’s brains and subsequently their potential for various predispositions, positive or negative. When our children are born, they do not formally learn in the same way they do later in life. In the first

year especially, children have little to no language, and so learning comes through ideas and emotions rather than through words. Despite the fact that our newborn and infant children are not reading books and solving math equations, they are indeed doing some of the most important and impactful learning of their whole lives. In the first 2 years of a child's life, they are literally laying down the neural pathways that help them later establish skills of emotional regulation, self soothing, empathy and so many other essential skills for happy, healthy living.

I recently attended a training where the instructor reminisced about parents that advocate for “Cry it out” methods, spanking or other harsh punishments. A parent's reasoning for these methods often goes something like the following: “They need to learn to self soothe, to calm down on their own, or to listen.” The instructor then went on, “Children also need to learn to do laundry, but not at a year old.” Parents often worry about “spoiling” their children. Society often tells us that we need to “teach them a lesson” even at very young ages. It is always important to maintain healthy boundaries and to establish order in our homes, but we lay the foundation for strong teaching and relationships in our homes by providing kind responses and gentle guidance to our infants.

There are a few things that our kids need to learn in their first 2 Years of life. If we teach them nothing else in those first couple years of life, teach them these:

The 4 lessons your infant needs to learn:

1. Their primary needs are met: Just like anyone else, babies need food, shelter, comfort and security. Unlike everyone else, they are completely helpless to get it for themselves. They depend on us to provide the basics of life to them. There will come a time when your child will need to learn to wait. They will need to learn that they cannot have everything they want, when they want it. Infancy is not the time to teach that. Infancy is the time to feed them when they need to be fed, hold them when they need comfort, and change their diaper when it is needed. I'm not suggesting that if you do not hold them the moment they start to cry that they will be scarred for life, but I am suggesting that our children need to know that when they cry, they are heard and their needs are met. Some parents choose to wear their baby, while others choose simply to keep them close. I don't think that one is right and the other is wrong, simply that our infant children need to know that we are close and will respond to their

needs. Seek to observe and understand your child and their needs and then be vigilant in responding appropriately.

2. They can trust you and the world around them: We are our children's first contact with the world and we act as a "prototype" for what they can expect from the world. Children that have parents that are dependable and trustworthy are more likely to have a healthy interest and trust in other relationships. Trust is the foundation of every healthy relationship. Safety and security are essential to our infant children. Make routines and schedules as reliable as possible. Respond to their needs and identify specific ways that you can display patience and compassion to your baby, even when it's hard.

3. What empathy and self-regulation looks like: The foundation of [our children's ability to self-regulate starts with us regulating our own emotional reactions](#). In the first 18 months of life children have little to no biological ability to regulate their own emotions. The structures in the brain are not yet developed enough to manage their own emotions and reactions. The act of "self-soothing" is not a matter of motivation but rather a matter of lack of neurological capability. This brain development occurs through positive modeling, as well as positive contact and external soothing that we provide to them. As I stated in the introduction of this article, in the first 18 months of a child's life, we are literally laying down the neural pathways that help them later establish skills of emotional regulation, self soothing and empathy.

4. That you love them: This seems to go without saying and yet we can sometimes allow stress and details of life to get in the way of showing genuine feelings and expressions of love. We share our love with our babies in the tone of our voice, the touch of our hand and even the look in our eyes. Babies are actually very good at picking up on our emotions and stress levels. It is important to be positive and expressive with our faces when we interact with our baby. This may be the single most important thing an infant needs to learn in their first couple years of life. It lays the foundation for their self concept, relational and social development and even has significant influence on the development of their overall brain function.

It's easy to get wrapped up in the little things from day to day. It's easy to think, "He needs to learn to eat his peas, to keep his hands to himself or to comply. He needs to know he doesn't always get what he wants. He needs to learn to self soothe and stop the tantrums." It's easy to think of

our infant's unfamiliarity with life as "bad behavior," but it is not. It is rather exploration and practice for them to solidly establish the 4 lessons outlined in this article. These 4 lessons help to equip their brains with the foundation for healthy behavior, habits and patterns. They also establish a parent/child relationship that leads to incredible influence. When they are able to internalize these 4 lessons in their hearts and minds, our jobs as parents will be easier and happier later on and our children will be more successful in navigating the world in a happy and healthy way.

From: <http://truparenting.net/4-things-infant-needs-learn-first-2-years-life/>