

How Babies Learn Through Play

If you've ever wondered what's happening in an infant "class" and whether a baby is truly learning, the answer is resoundingly, "Yes, babies can—and do—learn." There's no age limit on learning through play and with the right guidance, your infant can truly grow and develop.

"Babies are learning all the time," Vivvi curriculum manager Ajia Hunter said. "Educators think of babies as little scientists. Anything they're doing is an opportunity for learning because they learn by taking in the world around them."

The Science Behind Babies Learning

The first few days, weeks and months in a baby's life are vital for learning. From birth, your baby's brain is an information sponge, connecting the dots between everything.

In your baby's first three years, they develop [one million neural connections per second](#). That's how quickly they're learning and making sense of the world around them.

But although we're born with billions of neurons, they're not totally connected. Connection between synapses happens through repeated positive experiences (think: seeing Mama makes me smile, seeing a bottle means I'm going to eat). These connections help your baby learn key information they need to survive in their worlds.

How do babies learn?

Baby learning looks quite different from toddler learning, or any children for that matter.

Infants learn primarily through their senses. Everything they can see, hear, smell, touch—and shove in their mouths—is a learning tool.

Touching a stuffie feels soft. The sound machine plays music and shows lights. A chilled teething ring feels good on my gums. These are things we know because we've been on Earth for dozens of years. Your baby is just figuring it out! Touching the stuffie enough to know it is soft is *learning*. It's repeating positive experiences. It's making neural connections. And it's incredible to witness and facilitate.

Pretty soon, your baby will begin to use their *body* to make new discoveries. Reaching, grasping and holding objects gives them even more new ways to learn.

"If you see teachers shaking rattles in front of a baby or pushing an object near them, they're thinking about encouraging them to crawl or reach, or they're working on developing eye tracking," says Ajia. "Something that seems so simple has so much learning involved."

What are babies learning?

Babies are not necessarily learning to count or read or say their ABCs right now. What your baby is working on during the 0-12 month range is [learning their world](#).

This happens in a few key categories:

- Developmental Milestones
Things like your baby's first smile, waving bye-bye, or taking a first step are what we call *developmental milestones*. When your baby smiles at you and you smile back you're giving them positive reinforcement that smiles feel good and provide an emotional connection.
- Cognitive Milestones
This is brain development. It's the process of learning memory, language, thinking, and reasoning. It's what we mean when we say your baby is "making sense of the world." And it's a lot of work.
- Language Development
Learning language is so much more than just talking. Listening, understanding, and knowing the names of people and things your baby interacts with are all a part of language development. Knowing who to look for when they hear the name "Mama", knowing what "dog" means, knowing the word "milk".
- Social-Emotional Development
One of the most important realms of learning during infancy is social-emotional. During this stage, babies are developing bonds of love and trust with their parents and other care givers. The way parents cuddle, hold, and play with their baby will set the baseline for how their baby will interact with them and others.

"Babies don't need to count or learn their ABCs," Ajia said, "But if you think about the foundation of what math is, you might start out with classifications. And while babies can't say to you 'Yes, I am classifying right now', they are able to tell the difference between hard and soft items."

Infant Activities that Teach Learning in a Child Care setting

On our Vivvi campuses, *Treasure Baskets* are one of Ajia's favorite ways to engage infants in meaningful learning.

Treasure Baskets are containers of similarly grouped items stored on low, open shelving which allows the child to choose their own baskets to explore.

Containers could include:

- Soft stuffies
- Smooth metal objects
- Plastic cups
- Squishy balls
- Fabric

“Through that type of exploration and intentional gifts for learning through Treasure Baskets they are developing order,” Ajia said. “Some things are similar and some things are not.”

For babies not quite able to pull baskets off shelves, caregivers may gather a few baskets and place them on the floor around the baby on a play mat or blanket.

Babies learning at home

Grownups can support their infants’ learning at home, too. One of the most substantial ways you can support infant learning at home requires no purchase and no parenting book study nights.

You can support your baby’s learning by talking to them. Frequently.

[These tips](#) from the CDC are great and worth investing a few moments in reading.

- Talk to your baby. They will find your voice calming.
- Answer when your baby makes sounds by repeating the sounds and adding words. This will help them learn to use language.
- Read to your baby. This will help them develop and understand language and sounds.
- Sing to your baby and play music. This will help your baby develop a love for music and will help their brain development.
- Spend time cuddling and holding your baby. This will help them feel cared for and secure.
- Play with your baby when they’re alert and relaxed. Watch your baby closely for signs of being tired or fussy so that they can take a break from playing.
- Take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. It is easier to enjoy your new baby and be a positive, loving parent when you are feeling good yourself.

Long-term benefits of early learning

Investing intention in these early learning categories—the developmental, cognitive, language, and socio-emotional—better prepares your child for pre-school, yes.

It also greatly increases their overall experience.

“The first five years are the most important for brain development so if they’re not getting what they need in these years, it’s a key indicator they’re going to have a hard time navigating the rigors of life,” Ajia said.