

APPROACHES TO LEARNING DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

We often focus on what infants are learning, but how they learn is important too. Children's approaches to learning span four areas of development:

1. Emotional and behavior self-regulation
2. Cognitive self-regulation
3. Initiative and curiosity
4. Creativity

These interconnected skills and behaviors drive how children engage with their world. When we understand how infants learn, we can better help them grow their knowledge and skills across learning domains.

THE TAKE HOME

1. Learning happens in the context of relationships. The same is true for how infants learn.
2. How infants engage in learning changes as their senses and skills develop.
3. Play encourages curiosity and creativity and promotes self-regulation skills in infants.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

From birth, **infants' senses are ready to begin learning.** Much of this learning first happens as they look at the world around them. Infants spend about 20% of their awake time exploring with their eyes. As their attention and physical skills grow, they develop new ways to engage with people and objects in their environment.

The quality of early parent-infant interactions relates to a child's future self-regulation skills. Self-regulation is the ability to regulate emotions, behaviors, thoughts, actions, and attention. Infants have limited ability to self-regulate. **With adult support and practice, children develop skills to regulate on their own.**

Open-ended materials and activities encourage curiosity, initiative, persistence, and creativity in learning. Infants also need safe and predictable spaces to gain confidence in how they learn. **When infants feel safe and secure, they will go outside of their comfort zone to try new things.**

Infants are naturally curious — especially about other people! This means that play looks a bit different during the first year. To infants, adults are the best toys in the room. Infants are especially fascinated by their faces and love listening to familiar voices. Adults foster infants' curiosity and creativity by introducing them to new sights, sounds, and objects. Through play, infants learn about objects and other people and build skills across learning domains.





WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Look for these opportunities to support infant growth and development:

- Approaches to learning centers on how infants develop new skills and learn concepts. Every child is unique. They have different learning styles and are motivated by and interested in different things. Because of these differences, they engage in learning in different ways. For example, some infants are observers. They might watch you or another child do something over and over before trying themselves. Other infants learn by doing. They are active, hands-on learners. Some infants are a combination of both watchers and doers.
- Infants engage in learning through gentle, sensory experiences. They find you fascinating! They are curious about your words, actions, and facial expressions. They exercise curiosity and creativity as they explore with their senses. They mouth objects, drop toys from their highchair, and splash in the tub. How infants engage their senses can differ based on factors such as their temperament, culture, and ability level.
- Infants aren't born with the skills needed to regulate their emotions and behaviors on their own. They need us — calm, caring adults — to help with regulation until they develop the skills to self-regulate. There are many ways adults can provide external regulation. It might be rocking a baby to sleep or moving them to a quieter space when it's too overwhelming. With time, infants develop preferences for how adults soothe them. Then they use this information to decide how to soothe themselves when they are able. They might put their pacifier back in their own mouth, crawl to a quiet space, or rub their stuffed animal's tail. And in some cultures, children are taught to suppress their emotions from an early age. Learning how to regulate our emotions and behaviors is an important part of becoming a successful learner.
- Infants learn through play in safe and predictable environments, especially when they have access to materials that encourage their curiosity and creativity at their developmental level (e.g., mirrors for tummy time, soft blocks to manipulate or chew). Changing motor skills — most infants learn to roll, sit, crawl, and cruise — bring on new ways to explore. As infants' motor skills develop, adults set up safe spaces so infants can access and explore materials on their own. Adults are there to give extra supports or adapt materials when needed, including for children with a disability or suspected delay.
- Learning happens in the context of supportive relationships. When infants feel safe and cared for, they feel comfortable to try out different ways of engaging in learning. They show interest in and explore the objects and people in their world. An infant might laugh when they hear an adult use a silly voice while reading or frown when a new toy makes an unexpected noise. As they explore objects, they learn how to solve problems and how they can make things happen. For example, “When I push a car with wheels, it rolls away from me” or “When I throw my spoon on the floor, someone will pick it up and give it back to me. But that doesn't happen with yogurt.”



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TRY THIS!

The parent is the child’s most important teacher, and you are their “guide on the side.” Share these tips with families to help them support how their child learns:

- Learn to read and respond to their infants’ cues. Provide suggestions like using a quiet voice, rocking, or moving to a quiet space to help children regulate their emotions and behaviors.
- Choose sensory experiences to meet the infant’s needs, based on things like temperament, ability level, and culture. Give families opportunities to tell and show you what is meaningful to them.
- Establish predictable rituals and routines. Parents may want to try reading books before bed, playing peekaboo with a washcloth during bath time, or counting their baby’s toes before putting on their socks.
- Use a soothing voice to talk about your infant’s feelings, even if you think your child is too young to understand. Infants will respond to their voice and sense of calm. Support families in describing what is happening and what will happen next.
- Model a curious mindset. Encourage parents to use “I wonder” statements like, “I wonder what will happen when I push this button.” Point out why it’s important to talk about what happened and how it made them feel.
- Wait to let infants try things on their own before stepping in. When a new crawler points to a toy that is out of reach, encourage families to pause to give their child a chance to figure out a solution. Work with families to adapt when they step in based on their child’s temperament and tolerance for frustration.
- Model being a calm presence, especially when infants are working through big emotions. Explain how infants pick up on our response to their emotions. They learn how to manage emotions from watching us.
- Talk with families about their expectations and culture. Learn from them so you can help support their children in a culturally responsive way.
- Follow your infant’s lead. Encourage families to provide space and time for their infant to explore materials in their own way — even if that means watching them repeat an action over and over. This is how infants learn.
- Create a “yes space” where infants can safely explore. Work together with families to select developmentally appropriate, open-ended materials that encourage infants’ curiosity, initiative, and creativity.
- For infants with a disability or suspected delay, select or modify toys to encourage exploration. For example, help families select toys with a suction cup bottom or add Velcro to materials to stabilize them.

LEARN MORE

- [Effective Practice Guides](#)
- News You Can Use: Approaches Toward Learning — Foundations of School Readiness
 - [Part 1](#)
 - [Part 2](#)
 - [Part 3](#)



APPROACHES TO LEARNING DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

We often focus on what babies are learning, but how they learn is important too! The how behind children's learning includes self-regulation, initiative and curiosity, and creativity. These skills and behaviors are connected. They also drive how children engage with their world. When we understand how babies learn, we are better able to help them grow their knowledge and skills across learning domains.

EXPLORE OUTDOORS

Head outside! Follow your baby's lead as they explore with their senses. Give them time to follow curiosities with their eyes, hands, or feet. Put them on different surfaces like grass or sand. Talk about what they see and feel. If you're unable to go outside, bring the outdoors in. Leaves, sand, grass, and flowers offer new smells, sights, and textures for infants to explore.

MIRROR PLAY

Mirrors spark curiosity in babies. They love to look at faces. They are especially fascinated by the little face staring back at them. If culturally appropriate, let your baby look at a child-safe mirror during tummy time. Or sit them on your lap to look in a mirror together. Make silly faces or slowly move another object into view then out of view again. How does your baby respond?

CREATE A TREASURE BOX

Babies loves sensory play. Take an empty tissue or shoe box or a plastic container. Fill it with safe objects of different textures, sizes, and colors from around the house. Try items like textured balls, a spoon, rattles, large vinyl blocks, and soft objects like rolled-up socks. Let your infant choose what to explore. Describe the objects and how they are exploring as they play.

MAKE TIME TO RECHARGE

Seeing new sights and sounds are exciting, but they can also be overwhelming. Babies need you to help them focus and regulate their emotions. After a busy activity or a new experience, make time for them to recharge. Play soft music or sing a song. Let them sleep. Read books together or tell stories in a quiet space. Find what works best for your child.

