

## **How to Survive Parenting - The First Two Years**

*By Mike Witzky*

Adults don't change much in a year or two. Sometimes their hair grows longer or they gain or lose a few pounds, but for the most part if you saw someone you haven't seen in two years you would have no problem recognizing them. The first two years of an infant's life is much different. Think about all that develops in the first two years. They gain half of their adult height; they learn to walk (usually by age 1) and are talking in sentences by age two. They are well on their way to complex social interactions.

In the late 1940's and 50's American doctors told parents to feed their babies according to a strict feeding schedule. Newborns were to receive 4 ounces of formula every 4 hours, six times a day. The theory was that scheduled feeding would produce an orderly and controlled child. It is interesting to note that later these children became the hippies and love children of the 60's, with strong feelings of rebellion to authority. Thank goodness these practices gradually changed to feeding on demand. Breastfeeding also began to come back into popularity and there was no practical way to do a 4-hour schedule.

In the first months a baby relies on hearing and touching as their primary interaction with the world. Visual perception develops more slowly over the first 4 to 6 months. This is why a baby can't be held too much during the first year of their life. Discard any advice that you are spoiling your baby by holding them too much or picking them up when they cry. I don't think you can spoil a baby by paying a lot of attention to him or her. Also, realize that letting them cry for a time while you take a break or attend to other tasks isn't going to hurt them either. The point is that babies learn by touch, hearing and seeing during the first year, and giving them a comforting environment with lots of physical contact is a good thing. Also, an environment that has simple toys that light up and make noise are always fun for them. Research studies have also shown that music (especially Mozart) can help to stimulate development.

Motor skills develop rapidly during the first year. A newborn has a strong sucking and rooting reflex that helps them nurse. Soon infants begin to develop motor skills that give them the ability to control the movements of various parts of their body. Crawling on hands and knees involves coordinating arms and legs and can begin as early as 5 months with the first steps beginning around age 1, give or take 2 months either way. By age 6 months arm, hand and finger control develops. By age 6 months, most babies can reach and grab and hold on to objects, but they can't let go. Letting go will be mastered over the next few months. Finally, between 9 and 14 months, babies use their thumb and forefinger together to master picking up small objects.

I will explore how cognitive development occurs in my next article. For now, parents need to know that the first years are very important in the development of healthy children. Give them a lot of attention, an environment that has simple toys that they can grasp and see. Fathers – spend a lot of time with the baby too. Talk to them in normal language even though they won't understand what you are saying.

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Don't be afraid to use baby language, as babies will imitate your sounds as you imitate theirs. This will not interfere with their "proper" language development because you can begin to use normal speech as they begin to talk.

In the section above I discussed the sensory and motor development of infants, and in this section, I will look at the cognitive development that occurs during the first two years of a baby's life.

The sensory and motor development set the stage for the baby to explore their environment. Their cognitive and language development stage will pull together the sensory and motor skills in remarkable ways that begin their development in this area. This is the beginning of the heredity versus environment or nature versus nurture debate. I don't really believe there should be a debate at all because both the baby's environment and their genetics will play important parts in the next stage of development.

The development of sensorimotor skills depend more on physiological maturity than anything else. Babies are not like adults when it comes to thinking. Their thinking does not relate to words since they have not yet developed a vocabulary, but depends almost exclusively on their senses and movements. Between months 1 and 4, an infant begins to relate noise to objects and will begin to turn toward a noise to locate it. Between the ages of 8 to 12 months, you will see infants develop the ability to understand the idea of a toy disappearing under a blanket and knowing to lift the blanket up to find it. Thus hide and seek becomes an entertaining game parents can play with their baby. Right around the babies first year they begin to see events and anticipate what is going to come next. All mothers have experienced this when they begin to get their coats on and the baby begins to cry. They either anticipate mommy leaving them or a trip and this is their way of saying, "take me too."

Between ages 12 to 18 months, babies will practice their coordination of their hands, legs and arms and will get into everything. Learning happens at such a rapid rate that it is hard to keep up with them. The environment that you provide needs to move from colorful, but static toys, such as mobiles, to toys that make use of their developing motor skills. The baby will want to interact more with the toy, but don't expect them to pay more than 10 to 20 seconds on any one toy. Toy makers make great interactive toys that play music and light up when pressed. This interaction with their environment is what begins the development of vocabulary. By 18 months babies usually have between a 5 and 50 word vocabulary.

**Here is a word of warning.** Our society has become very competitive. In the area of cognitive development of your baby, it is more important to provide a safe, warm and loving environment than to try to worry about ways increase your babies IQ by 5 points. Teach your babies to be kind by being kind. Teach your babies to be patient by being patient. Teach your babies to accept others who are different by your accepting people who are different.

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There will be many opportunities in later years to help them understand the competitive nature of our society. Take the time now to help them learn that we live in a very fragile world with a rich diversity that needs to be appreciated and cared for.

**Here is a word of advice.** The infant years are so important because it is the time that will shape the rest of the child's development more than any other. It is important to grasp that it is not only your baby that is in a developing process but you are too. You are learning to be a parent.

This is your opportunity to be the best parent you can possibly be. You wouldn't be reading this article if that wasn't your desire. Therefore, I will be taking opportunities in the weeks to come to speak to you directly and give specific advice as to what to do and not to do.

In previous articles, I have given the following advice: To mothers - Postpartum depression is very common as a new mother's hormones rebalance, but if it goes on too long or is too severe, tell your doctor because there are many effective treatments. To fathers – Tell your babies that you love them. Say it out loud (in private if necessary at first, then practice it in front of others). Men have more trouble with this than women but it is so important for fathers to be able to say, “*I love you*” and begin this early and it will make it so much easier when the children get older.

Now for my word of advice for this article, don't use love as a method for discipline. There are numerous other ways to discipline child, but withholding your love isn't one of them. I will discuss what I mean by this in my next article, as I have gone way beyond my allotted space this time.

If you think your child may benefit from professional assistance, please go to the “*Find a Service Provider*” section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

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