Infants and Toddlers on a Learning Adventure

The birth of a baby brings with it joy, happiness, excitement and questions. Who does he look like? Do her long fingers mean she will play the piano? What do you think he will be when he grows up? She seems so calm; do you think she has my personality? He’s so long; do you think he will be another Michael Jordan?

As a new parent, these are good questions to ask. So much of how a baby will develop, grow and learn is determined from birth. Babies are born ready to learn from the moment they come into this world. This time is critical for their brain development. In fact 85 percent of their brain is developed in the first three years – these are the most critical years for a baby to develop mentally, physically and social-emotionally.

For a newborn child, a whole world of possibilities lies ahead. According to Ellen Galinsky, early childhood researcher and author of *Mind in the Making*, “babies’ brains appear to be wired to help them understand and know about the world in specific ways, and that learning begins long before babies can be taught this kind of knowledge.”

Early childhood education, at home or in child care, helps a child find her place in the world. As they grow, infants and toddlers need plenty of time and opportunities to explore in order to learn about the world. They need guidance, encouragement and a safe environment to support their learning and development. Our job is to be the guide in this learning adventure.

How Do Children Learn?

Children learn through play, often called children’s work. In fact, play helps them “work out” important things like getting along with others and testing out who they will become later in life.

In fact, Action for Children has an entire parent education program called Learning Begins Right from the Start. Here are some examples of infant/toddler activities from our early learning guidebooks.

**Adventures in Literacy:**

Talk to your child as you feed, bathe, or dress him. He needs to hear the language spoken naturally. Talk everywhere, in the house, in the car, shopping. You can even read aloud from your newspaper or magazine. Your child needs to hear the sound of words. This is how he learns new words.

**Adventures in Math:**

Teach your child a finger play that includes numbers, such as:

- Way up high in the apple tree,
- Three red apples, one, two, three. (hold up 1, 2, 3 fingers)
- The wind comes to town
- Whoo, whoo
- An apple fell down
- Plop
- One red apple on the ground. (hold up 1 finger)

Repeat, but on the last line say, “Two red apples on the ground.”

Repeat using three, four and five apples.
**Adventures in Science:**
While your child is in the bathtub describe the terms sink and float. Put an object in the water and explain that it either sinks or floats. Give him different objects and let him tell you if he thinks it will sink or float.

Use objects like a washcloth, bath toys, measuring cups, spoons, etc. for this experiment.

As you can see, the activities are not isolated but can be used to reinforce all learning.

**Why is Early Childhood Education a Good Investment?**
When we hear economists support investing in the first five years of life, we know that this investment has the potential for a good return. This early investment is not like any other. For every dollar invested in early childhood today, there is a savings from the societal effects of teen pregnancies, crime, truancy and school drop outs.

As Marion Wright Edelman, founder and president of Children's Defense Fund, said, “One dollar up front prevents the spending of many dollars down the road. The question is not whether we can afford to invest in every child, the question is whether we can afford not to.”

Infants and toddlers are on a remarkable journey. This precious newborn has just 1890 days until she enters kindergarten. This is just a short amount of time to set the foundation for how he succeeds in school and his potential for being the next Michael Jordan or hers as the first female president of the United States.

As loving parents and caring adults, it is most important to help our young navigate the world. It is an awesome responsibility, but the return is well worth the effort.

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