



May 1, 2024

Happy Early Intervention Month!

This year we are excited to share information on Building Healthy Connections to build strong futures. Having an infant and toddler is a very busy, exciting, and sometimes overwhelming time. We hope the information and strategies shared below show how important and easy it is to build a positive responsive relationship with your infant and toddler.

Building connections refers to the brain development that occurs when you build strong, nurturing, responsive relationships with your infant and toddler. This is extremely important at all ages, but especially important in the early years of birth to three. During the first few years of life, our brains are developing at a rapid pace, much faster than any other time in our life span. A child’s brain is like a sponge from the time they are born, soaking up everything that’s going on around them. If they are soaking up happy healthy interactions, it is building a happy healthy foundation. Each interaction helps shape their brain development. Having at least one committed relationship with a supportive parent or caregiver can lead to increased focus, resilience, and more healthy relationships in their future.

During the first three years of life, emotionally nourishing relationships lay the foundation for lifelong health and well-being. If the early relationships are nurturing and attentive, the brain connections being made are also a healthy foundation, which over time continue to grow stronger and lead to future health and success in school and life. On the other hand, if this foundation is not nourished and supported, children may have a harder time building healthy relationships, connecting with others, and focusing later in life.

A few ways to build healthy relationships and promote brain development are:

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| Listen to your child | Model kindness and patience |
| Be encouraging and positive | Show interest in what they are doing, join them |
| Join them in their play | Talk to them, telling them what both you and they are doing |
| Try something new together | Go for a walk/stroller ride and talk about what you see |

*(More details on this can be found in the addendum “How Can We Build Healthy Connections?”)

The concept of “Serve and Return” is a great way to build relationships and brain development. Serve and return is responsive interactions between children and the people who care for them. Five steps for brain-building serve and return can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNrnZag17Ek>

More information on learning about social emotional development in your infant can be found at: <https://pathways.org/watch/parents-guide-to-babys-social-emotional-development/>.

We hope you enjoy trying some of the above strategies, connecting in new ways with your child or just more often. Know that your efforts and your positive responsive interactions with your child make a difference and are building a stronger future!

All our best to you and have a wonderful year!

The Infant & Toddler Connection of Greater Prince William Team

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How Can We Build Healthy Connections?

Be patient...Model Kindness.

Being attentive to your infant and toddler's attempts to communicate builds trust and engagement. Infants communicate through eye contact, cooing, babbling and yes, sometimes crying. Toddlers build on this and communicate with gestures, signs, pointing and words, and sometimes tantrums. Responding to them by using a kind voice, looking at them/smiling, and holding/hugging them, reassures them that you hear them and are present to help them meet their needs. This nurturing response builds strong connections. When a parent comforts their child, it builds healthy, responsive relationships... and results in more brain connections!

Talk to Them.

Talking to them also builds healthy connections. Talk about what you are doing and what they are doing throughout the day, for example:

During mealtime: Sit with them. Talk about what you both are eating. If they are still bottle feeding or nursing, talk to them while you are holding them, sing to them or tell a story that you enjoyed as a child.

During play time: Join them in the activity. Showing them that you are interested in what they are doing builds healthy connections, as well as supports cognitive development. Take turns. Share. Talk to them about the activity. Clean up together and use this time as a learning opportunity by talking about what you are putting away, showing them that working together is helpful.

Try Something New Together.

Every time you try something new, it stimulates brain growth and every time you do it together, it contributes to a stronger relationship. So, try a new food together. Dance. Sing. Read a book. Color. Play a new game.

Outside play is a very rich sensory experience (smells, sounds, sights, textures, temperatures) which stimulates brain development, and doing this together builds a strong foundation for healthy relationships. Sit outside together on a nice day and have a snack together or just enjoy the sunshine. Maybe pick some leaves, flowers, mulch to touch and smell or use them in pretend play. Talk about how they feel, smell, their color, etc.

Go for a walk inside or outside and talk about what you see together.

Make Healthy Choices.

- *Get Moving: Daily activity can help us think better, eat better and sleep better.
- *Eat a healthy diet: Offering healthy choices to eat early on leads to healthy eating habits.
- *Limit Screen Time: American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following:
 - Under 18 months: avoid screen time other than video-chatting
 - Age 18-24 months: If you choose to introduce screen time, find high quality programming, AND watch or play **together**.
 - Age 2-5 years: Limit screen use to one hour per day of high-quality programs.

Have fun together knowing you are building a stronger future!

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