

Ten Tips for Parents on Creating a Nurturing Family Environment

1. Start early. Development starts at conception. The brain grows the fastest and lays down the architecture the child will need for learning, and for happiness, in the first three years of life.
2. Be positive, playful, warm and nurturing. Emotions are contagious. What you are feeling and expressing to your child activates circuits in his brain that make him feel the same things that you are feeling. It is the emotional equivalent of a cold (Goleman, 2006). If you are feeling angry, disgusted, frustrated, your child will “catch” those feelings. If you feel those feelings all the time, your child’s brain will “wear a path” for those negative feelings in his brain and the circuits, or pathways, in the brain for those feelings will be quick to activate.
3. Spend lots of time playing with your child. She needs a secure bond to you. Attachment takes time.
4. Pay attention to your child’s moral development. Even simple games teach small children important lessons about what kind of people we want them to be. Taking turns, sharing toys and listening to others are skills that prepare children to get along with others, the most important skill your child will need for kindergarten. Meeting your child’s emotional needs does not mean catering to her every whim. Have clear moral expectations from the beginning, model what you expect of your children and enforce your rules clearly but kindly.
5. Hug, touch, pat, cuddle and kiss your infant or toddler. Touch and physical experiences also program your child’s brain in important ways both physical and emotional. Children who are not touched and held do not develop well emotionally and physically.
6. Talk to your child. “Talk” back when your infant coos and babbles. Wait for her to respond to you; that is, listen to her. Have a “conversation,” even if your baby doesn’t have words yet.
7. Use play, art and music to entertain your child instead of TV. These activities result in positive changes in the brain that are important for later problem-solving and learning.
8. Protect your child from stress, violence and trauma. A young child’s brain is very sensitive to stress and trauma. Prolonged exposure of a child to trauma and violence will cause permanent changes in her brain.
9. Have family rituals! Read and sing to your child every day, starting at birth. Have a regular bedtime and bedtime ritual. Have family meal times with the TV turned off, and talk about what everyone did during the day and how they felt. Have a “special time” with your child after work.
10. Never use food to comfort or entertain your child, or they will learn to use food that way. Food is for nutrition, not for comfort.

References and Resources

Goleman, D. (2006) *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, Bantam.

Zero to Three, *Brain Wonders: Helping Babies and Toddlers Develop*. Available at: www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders/

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