

Building a Healthy Brain

Did you know?

- The brain grows most rapidly and is most adaptable in early childhood. It makes more than 1 million new connections every second (Center on the Developing Child, 2017).
- A child's experiences in the world shape how the brain grows.

Here's how to help your child build a healthy brain:

Be sure your child gets the sleep he needs. Young children need lots of sleep. The American Academy of Pediatrics (Paruthi et al., 2016) recommends the following:

- newborns (birth–3 months): 14–17 hours
- infants (4–11 months): 12–15 hours
- toddlers (1–2 years): 11–14 hours
- preschoolers (3–5 years): 10–13 hours

Ensure that your child gets the nutrition she needs. Once your child is eating solid foods, be sure she eats a balanced diet that includes vegetables, lean protein, and healthy fats. For more information, go to www.cdc.gov.

Protect your child from danger in the environment. This includes lead paint, prescription/illegal drugs, and second-hand smoke. Ask your doctor about other substances that can be harmful to your child.

Help your child cope with stress. Experiencing prolonged stress can have a negative impact on a child's developing brain. You can help by providing comfort and support during stressful times. For children older than 2, help them talk about stressful experiences and make sense of them. "That dog was big, and that made you scared. When he went to lick you, you were afraid he might bite you. But you see that he was actually very nice and friendly, and you are okay." Or, "I know you don't like it when Daddy leaves. I will miss you too—it's hard to say goodbye. Let's do our good-bye hug, and if you are feeling sad, you can look at the photo of you and me in your cubby. And then we will be together at the end of the day."

Continue the learning at home:

You play a powerful role in helping to create the best environment for your child's growing! The 5 R's below can provide a good guide:

- **Relationships:** The loving bond you create with your child is the single most important factor in supporting healthy brain development. Always keep that top of mind.
- **Responsive interactions:** Tune in to your child's cues—her facial expressions, gestures, sounds, and words—to understand how she is feeling and what she is thinking, and then respond in ways that are supportive and sensitive to what she is "telling" you she needs.
- **Respect:** Try to see the world through your child's eyes and respect his "perspective"—what his unique experience is.
- **Routines:** Create daily routines so your child knows what to expect. This helps her feel safe and secure, which calms her brain and enables her to focus on play and exploration.
- **Repetition:** Repeat your child's favorite songs, rhymes, and stories to help build brain connections.