



Parents



**Little Sparks
Big Starts**



How parents and caregivers impact brain development

For more information visit: www.littlesparks.org.uk

The first years lay the foundation for life

From pregnancy through age 5, your child’s brain is growing and changing faster than at any other time in life. This is because the brain is highly “plastic”, meaning it is especially sensitive to experiences.

What does that mean?

The brain can form and rewire connections quickly during this stage.

Positive experiences now have a lasting effect on your child’s future health, learning, and behaviour.

This period lays the foundation for long-term physical and mental health.



Brain development starts before birth

Did you know your baby’s brain starts developing in the womb?

- Essential neural pathways (brain connections) begin forming during pregnancy.
- Even before birth, babies can sense and respond to sounds, movement, and light.
- After birth, these pathways are strengthened every time you talk, cuddle, sing, or play with your baby.

The more loving, positive experiences your child has, the stronger their brain connections become.



What you do really matters



Serve and return

When your baby makes a sound or gesture, respond!
This back-and-forth helps build trust and thinking skills.

Example: Baby reaches out, you say, "You want the toy?
Here it is!"

Scan to watch a video:
Serve and return



Talk and baby chat

Your baby learns language just by hearing your voice. Talk to them throughout the day.



Scan to watch a video:
How to engage
in baby talk.



Example: “Let’s put on your coat. One arm, then the other!”



Play together

Play supports imagination, memory, movement, and bonding.

Example: Peekaboo, stacking blocks, or dancing to music all help the brain grow.



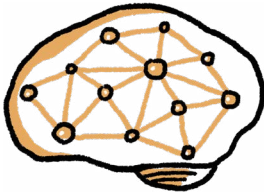
Scan to watch a video:
Pairing socks together

Why it matters for long term health

The early years don't just affect childhood—
they shape a child's entire life.

Positive care in the early years supports:

Healthy brain
architecture



Stronger immune
systems



Resilience and
emotional wellbeing



Better physical and
mental health later
in life



The role of the early years settings

Nurseries, childminders, and childcare staff help support your child's early development by:

Creating safe, stimulating environments

Responding to each child's needs and signals

Encouraging curiosity, communication, and movement

Building strong, trusting relationships

These settings work best in partnership with you, the parents, creating consistency and support between home and care.

What you can do at home

Simple, everyday actions make a big difference:



Talk and sing as you go about your day

Make eye contact and respond to your child's cues

Play and explore together

Provide comfort, routine, and love

These are the building blocks for your child's healthy mind and body.

What this looks like in practice

Nursery staff



- Create warm, predictable routines so children feel safe.
- Respond to children's cues—if they're upset, tired, or curious, notice and support them.
- Use play-based learning to support language, physical skills, and problem-solving.
- Give each child time and attention, building secure, trusting relationships.
- Talk and interact throughout the day: "You're pouring the water—great job!"

- Spend quality time, even during routines (feeding, dressing, nappy changing).
- Use eye contact, smiles, and simple words to connect with your child.
- Create a calm and loving home environment where your child can play and explore.
- Be consistent and responsive—let your child know they are safe and loved.
- Follow their interests—if they love animals, read animal books or pretend to be different creatures together!

Parents & Carers



For babies

(0-12 months)



- Talk, sing, and cuddle often—your voice and touch help their brain grow.
- Give them time on the floor to move and explore.
- Use toys that make noise, light up, or have different textures.
- Mirror their facial expressions and sounds—this builds social and emotional skills.

- Support their growing independence while staying close and reassuring.
- Offer choices: “Would you like the red cup or the blue cup?”
- Play games that involve taking turns and naming things.
- Expect big emotions—help them name their feelings and calm down: “I see you’re sad. I’m here.”

For toddlers

(1-3 years)



- Encourage imaginative play, storytelling, and role-play.
- Help them practise social skills like sharing, turn-taking, and problem-solving.
- Give them simple responsibilities to build confidence: “Can you help set the table?”
- Support their curiosity with open-ended questions: “What do you think will happen next?”

For preschoolers

(3-5 years)



Final thought...

The brain is especially sensitive from birth to 5—and again from 11 to 25. That's why the early years are such a powerful time to build strong foundations for life.

You don't need to be perfect—just present, loving, and responsive. Every cuddle, every word, every moment matters.



Helpful terms

Neural pathways: Connections in the brain that help your child think, learn, and feel.

Play-based learning: Learning through fun activities like games, pretend play, and exploring.

Imaginative play: Pretending to be someone or something else, like playing house or pretending to be animals.

Open-ended questions: Questions that don't have one right answer, like "What do you think will happen next?"; they help children think and talk more.

Resilience: The ability to bounce back from challenges or tough feelings.

Brain architecture: The basic structure of the brain, built through early experiences. It's like the foundation of a house, strong early experiences help build a strong brain.

Emotional wellbeing : How a child feels inside. It includes feeling

CREATED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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