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# The First Six Years

How to Build a Healthy, Curious Brain in Your Child



A practical, science-based guide for parents of children aged 0 to 6

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ABDUS SAMAD

## Important note

This book shares general, evidence-based information to help parents support their child's healthy development. It is **not medical advice** and does not replace the care of a doctor, nurse, or child development specialist. Every child grows at their own pace. If you are worried about your child's health, growth, hearing, vision, behavior, or development, please talk to a qualified health professional.

The information here is based on guidance from respected organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Harvard Center on the Developing Child. Recommendations can change, so always check current guidance and your local health services.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Why the Early Years Matter

Every parent wants the same thing: a child who is healthy, happy, and able to learn. The good news is that you do not need expensive toys, special apps, or a university degree to help your child's brain grow well. The most powerful tools are already in your home: your voice, your attention, good sleep, simple food, play, and a safe, loving routine.

From birth to about six years old, a child's brain develops faster than at any other time in life. During these years, a child learns to move, talk, think, control feelings, and relate to other people. The experiences your child has now help shape the foundation for later learning, health, and behavior.

### What this book will give you

Plain-language explanations of how the young brain develops.

Simple daily habits you can start today, with almost no cost.

Clear guidance on sleep, food, play, language, screens, and big feelings.

Honest answers to common myths, and signs that tell you when to seek help.

## How to use this book

You do not have to read it in order. If your child is a toddler, start with Chapters 2, 6, and 8. If sleep is hard in your home, go straight to Chapter 3. At the end of most chapters you will find a short **Try This Today** box. Pick one idea, try it for a week, and then add another. Small steps, repeated daily, matter more than big changes that are hard to keep.

Please remember: you are not expected to be a perfect parent. Mistakes are normal and children are resilient. What helps most is a caring adult who tries, repairs, and keeps showing up.

A newborn baby arrives with almost all of the brain cells (neurons) they will ever have. What changes quickly is the number of **connections** between those cells. These connections, called synapses, are how the brain sends messages. According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, more than one million new neural connections form every second in the first few years of life.

## Growing fast

The brain roughly doubles in size in the first year. By about age 3 it has reached around 80 percent of its adult size, and by age 5 about 90 percent. This is why the early years are called a period of rapid brain growth.

## Use it or lose it

A young child's brain makes many more connections than it needs. Over time, the connections that are used often become stronger, and those that are rarely used are gradually trimmed away. This process is called **pruning**. It is how experience shapes the brain: a baby who hears many words, sees loving faces, and gets to explore is strengthening the pathways for language, social skills, and thinking.

## Brains are built from the bottom up

Simple skills develop first, and more complex skills are built on top of them. For example, a baby learns to see and hear, then babble, then say words, then put words into sentences. Strong early foundations make later learning easier.

## Relationships are the architecture

The most important ingredient for healthy brain development is a stable, caring relationship with at least one adult. When a baby cries and someone responds, the child learns that the world is safe and that they matter. This sense of safety helps the brain focus its energy on learning rather than on stress.

### It is never too late

The early years are special, but the brain keeps changing and learning throughout childhood and adult life. If your child is older, or if the early years were hard, you can still make a big difference. Every loving, responsive day helps.

### Try This Today

Spend 10 minutes of undistracted time with your child. Put your phone away, get down to their level, and follow what interests them.

# Serve and Return: The Most Powerful Brain Builder

# 02

Imagine a game of tennis or volleyball. One person serves, the other returns, and the ball goes back and forth. Child development researchers use this idea to describe how babies and young children learn from the adults around them. A child "serves" by babbling, making a face, pointing, laughing, or crying. You "return" by responding to what they are showing you.

These back-and-forth moments build and strengthen brain connections, especially those for communication, emotions, and social skills. They also tell the child: "I see you. You matter."

## Five simple steps

- **Notice** the serve. Watch what your child is looking at, pointing to, or sounding out.
- **Return** the serve. Respond with a smile, a touch, a word, or a sound.
- **Name it.** Put words to what your child is doing or feeling: "You see the bird! The bird is flying."
- **Take turns.** Wait. Give your child time to respond, even if it takes a few seconds.
- **Practice endings and beginnings.** Notice when your child is finished with an activity and gently help them move to the next.

## Everyday examples

- A baby coos at you. You coo back, smile, and wait for the next sound.
- A toddler holds up a toy. You say, "That is a red car! Vroom, vroom!"
- A four-year-old tells a long, confusing story. You listen, ask a question, and show you are interested.
- A child is frustrated. You say, "You feel angry because the tower fell. Let us try again together."

Serve and return does not need a special time or tool. It can happen during bath time, meals, walks, diaper changes, and car rides.

### Try This Today

Choose one routine, such as mealtime or bath time, and make it a back-and-forth conversation. Pause after you speak and wait for your child to "answer", whether with a sound, a gesture, or a word.

# Sleep: When the Brain Does Its Homework

Sleep is not wasted time for a growing child. During sleep, the brain organizes what it has learned, strengthens important connections, and supports growth and the immune system. Children who sleep well often find it easier to pay attention, manage feelings, and learn.

## How much sleep does a child need?

The table below shows the sleep ranges recommended by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, for a full 24-hour period including naps. Newborns sleep in shorter stretches and their needs vary widely, so ask your health worker if you are unsure.

| Age            | Recommended sleep in 24 hours   |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| 4 to 12 months | 12 to 16 hours (including naps) |
| 1 to 2 years   | 11 to 14 hours (including naps) |
| 3 to 5 years   | 10 to 13 hours (including naps) |
| 6 years        | 9 to 12 hours                   |

## Building a healthy sleep routine

- **Keep a regular schedule.** Go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day, including weekends where possible.
- **Create a calming wind-down.** A bath, a short story, a lullaby, and a cuddle in the same order each night tell the brain that sleep is coming.
- **Make the room sleep-friendly.** Quiet, dark or dimly lit, and a comfortable temperature.
- **Turn off screens** at least an hour before bed. Bright light and exciting content can make it harder to fall asleep.
- **Avoid heavy meals and sugary drinks** close to bedtime.
- **Be patient and consistent.** New routines usually take one to two weeks to settle in.

### Safe sleep for babies

Always follow your doctor's or health worker's safe-sleep advice. In general, babies should be put to sleep on their backs, on a firm, flat surface, with no pillows, thick blankets, or soft toys in the sleep space.

### Try This Today

Write down a simple 3-step bedtime routine (for example: bath, story, lights out) and follow it tonight and every night this week.

The brain uses a large share of a young child's energy. Good nutrition from pregnancy through early childhood supports healthy brain growth. The goal is not a perfect diet, but regular, varied, nutritious meals in a calm, loving setting.

### The first two years

The WHO recommends feeding babies only breast milk for the first six months, then continuing breastfeeding along with safe, nutritious complementary foods up to two years or beyond. If breastfeeding is not possible, talk to your health worker about the best option for your baby.

### Nutrients that matter for the brain

| Nutrient                         | Why it matters                                                                           | Some food sources                                                                         |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Iron                             | Supports brain development and helps carry oxygen. Low iron is common in young children. | Meat, fish, eggs, lentils (dal), beans, dark green leafy vegetables, iron-fortified foods |
| Iodine                           | Needed for brain and nervous system development.                                         | Iodized salt (in small amounts), fish, dairy, eggs                                        |
| Protein                          | Builds and repairs body tissue and supports growth.                                      | Eggs, fish, chicken, milk, yogurt, lentils, beans                                         |
| Healthy fats (including omega-3) | Important parts of brain tissue.                                                         | Fish (small, low-mercury types), eggs, nuts and seeds in safe forms, vegetable oils       |
| Vitamin A and zinc               | Support growth, vision, and the immune system.                                           | Orange and yellow vegetables and fruits, leafy greens, meat, dairy, legumes               |

Do not give vitamin or mineral supplements unless a health professional recommends them. Too much of some nutrients can be harmful.

### Healthy eating habits

- **Offer a rainbow.** Fruits, vegetables, grains, protein foods, and dairy or alternatives each day.
- **Let your child decide how much to eat.** You decide what and when; they decide how much. Avoid forcing or bribing.
- **Offer new foods many times.** It can take 10 or more tries before a child accepts a new food.
- **Limit sugary drinks and snacks.** Water and milk are the best everyday drinks. Fruit juice, soda, and sweets add little nutrition.
- **Eat together** when you can, without screens. Mealtimes are great for serve-and-return conversation.

### **Food safety for little ones**

Do not give honey to babies under 12 months. Cut or avoid round, hard, or sticky foods that can cause choking, such as whole grapes, whole nuts, hard candy, and large chunks of raw carrot. Always stay with your child while they eat.

### **Try This Today**

Add one iron-rich or protein food and one colorful vegetable to your child's meals today, and sit down to eat together without phones or TV.

# Play and Movement: The Real Learning

For a young child, play is not a break from learning. It is learning. When children stack blocks, pretend to cook, chase a ball, or splash in water, they are building their brain, body, and social skills at the same time.

## Why play works

- It builds problem-solving, memory, and creativity.
- It develops large muscles (running, climbing) and small muscles (grasping, drawing).
- It teaches sharing, turn-taking, and empathy.
- It helps children work through feelings in a safe way.

## Active bodies, active brains

The WHO suggests that toddlers and preschoolers (ages 1 to 4) be physically active for at least 3 hours a day, spread throughout the day, and that babies have several short periods of floor-based play, including tummy time when awake and supervised. Children aged 5 and older should have at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each day.

## Simple play ideas by age

| Age            | Ideas that cost little or nothing                                                                                                                    |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0 to 12 months | Tummy time, peekaboo, shaking a safe rattle, looking at faces, lullabies and gentle rhymes, playing with soft cloths and wooden spoons (supervised). |
| 1 to 2 years   | Stacking cups or boxes, pouring water in the bath, pushing and pulling toys, scribbling with a big crayon, dancing to music, naming body parts.      |
| 3 to 4 years   | Pretend play (shop, kitchen, doctor), simple puzzles, sorting objects by color or size, playing in sand or mud, running and jumping games.           |
| 5 to 6 years   | Drawing and early writing, building with blocks, simple board games, counting games, bike or ball games, helping with real tasks like cooking.       |

## Toys: less is more

You do not need many toys. Open-ended objects such as blocks, balls, boxes, scarves, cups, and art supplies are often better than toys that light up and make noise, because they invite the child to think, create, and imagine. Rotating a small number of toys can keep play fresh.

### Try This Today

Spend 15 minutes on the floor playing with your child, letting them lead. Outdoors is even better, as fresh air and space support movement and mood.

Language is one of the strongest predictors of later learning, and it begins long before a child says a first word. Babies tune in to the sounds of their family's language from the very beginning.

## Talk, talk, talk

- **Narrate your day.** "I am washing the rice. Now I am pouring the water."
- **Use rich words.** Do not worry about "baby talk". Use real words alongside sweet sounds.
- **Expand what your child says.** If they say "dog run", you say, "Yes, the big dog is running fast!"
- **Ask open questions** as children grow: "What do you think will happen next?"

## Read aloud every day

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages reading aloud to children from birth. Even a baby who cannot understand the words benefits from your voice, the closeness, and the rhythm of language. Reading together builds vocabulary, listening, attention, and a love of books.

- Choose short books with bright pictures for babies and toddlers; add stories and longer books as your child grows.
- Let your child hold the book, turn pages, and point to pictures.
- Stop to chat about the pictures rather than rushing to finish.
- Read favorites again and again. Repetition helps children learn.
- No books at home? Use the library, share with neighbors, tell family stories, or make your own picture books.

## Songs, rhymes, and stories

Songs and rhymes help children hear the sounds in words, which supports later reading. Sing lullabies, clap to rhythms, and tell stories from your own culture and family. These traditions also build identity and belonging.

## More than one language

Children can learn two or more languages at the same time. Growing up in a multilingual home is not harmful and can bring cognitive and cultural benefits. Speak to your child in the language you are most comfortable with, as this gives them the richest conversation.

### Try This Today

Read one short book together tonight, or tell a story from your own childhood. Pause and let your child add a sound, a word, or an idea.

Phones, tablets, and TVs are part of modern life, and most parents feel guilty about screens at some point. The goal is not perfection, but making screens a small, thoughtful part of a day full of real-world interaction.

### What the WHO recommends

| Age          | Guidance                                                                                                  |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Under 1 year | Screen time is not recommended.                                                                           |
| 1 to 2 years | Sedentary screen time is not recommended. For 2-year-olds, no more than 1 hour a day, and less is better. |
| 3 to 4 years | No more than 1 hour a day of sedentary screen time, and less is better.                                   |

### Why too much screen time can be a problem

- It can replace the face-to-face, back-and-forth interaction that builds language and social skills.
- It can take time away from sleep, play, and physical activity.
- Fast, flashy content can make it harder for some children to settle and focus afterward.
- A parent's own distracted phone use can interrupt serve-and-return moments too.

### Practical tips

- **Choose quality.** Slow-paced, age-appropriate, educational programs are better than fast, noisy ones or ads.
- **Watch together** and talk about what you see.
- **Set screen-free zones and times:** mealtimes, bedrooms, and the hour before sleep.
- **Avoid using screens to calm a child** every time they are upset. Help them learn to manage feelings with you.
- **Turn off background TV** when no one is watching. It can reduce the quality of play and conversation.
- **Model the habit.** Children copy what they see. Keep your own phone use low when you are with them.
- **Have alternatives ready:** books, music, drawing, outdoor play, or a simple household task together.

#### Try This Today

Pick one daily screen-free time, such as dinner, and make it a family habit. Replace it with talking, music, or play.

Tantrums, hitting, refusing to share, and sudden tears are normal parts of early childhood. They do not mean that your child is bad or that you are failing. Young children simply have an immature emotional control system. The part of the brain responsible for self-control, the prefrontal cortex, keeps developing into the mid-twenties.

## Behavior is communication

When a young child misbehaves, they are often telling you they are tired, hungry, overwhelmed, scared, or need attention. Looking for the need behind the behavior helps you respond more effectively.

## Helping your child with big feelings

- **Stay calm.** Your calm helps your child's brain settle. Take a breath before you respond.
- **Get low and connect.** Make eye contact, speak softly, and stay close.
- **Name the feeling.** "You are very angry because we have to leave the park." Naming feelings helps the brain make sense of them.
- **Set clear, kind limits.** "You can be angry, but you cannot hit. I will not let you hurt anyone."
- **Offer choices** within limits. "Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the red shirt?"
- **Talk later.** When everyone is calm, briefly discuss what happened and what to try next time.

## Discipline that helps

Children learn best from warm, consistent guidance. Research consistently shows that harsh punishment, such as hitting or shouting at a child, does not teach better behavior and is linked with more behavior and emotional problems. Positive approaches include clear rules, praising effort and kindness, predictable routines, short calm-down breaks, and natural, fair consequences.

### Praise effort, not just results

Instead of "You are so smart", try "You worked hard on that puzzle and did not give up." This helps children see mistakes as part of learning.

## Protecting your child from toxic stress

Short-term stress is a normal part of life. But ongoing, severe stress without caring adult support, known as toxic stress, can harm a growing brain. Examples include repeated harsh treatment, neglect, or living with violence. A strong, supportive relationship is the best protection. If your family is facing serious stress, reaching out for help is a sign of strength.

### Try This Today

The next time your child has a strong feeling, name it out loud, stay close, and wait. Notice how quickly the storm passes when they feel understood.

| Common belief                                                 | What the evidence suggests                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Playing classical music makes babies smarter.                 | Research has not shown that simply listening to classical music raises intelligence. Music is still wonderful for bonding, language, and mood, so sing and play music together. |
| Flashcards and educational apps for babies speed up learning. | Babies learn best through real people, real objects, and real play. Interaction beats flashcards and apps.                                                                      |
| Only the first three years matter.                            | The early years are very important, but the brain keeps developing through childhood and beyond. It is never too late to help.                                                  |
| Expensive toys build smarter children.                        | Simple, open-ended materials and your attention matter far more than price.                                                                                                     |
| Holding a baby too much will spoil them.                      | Responding to a baby's needs builds trust and security. You cannot spoil a baby with love and comfort.                                                                          |
| Intelligence is fixed at birth.                               | Genes matter, but experiences, relationships, nutrition, and sleep shape how the brain develops.                                                                                |

Children develop at different speeds, and a small delay does not always mean a problem. But early support can make a big difference when a child needs extra help. Trust your instincts: you know your child best.

## Talk to a doctor or health worker if your child:

- Loses skills they once had, such as words, gestures, or social interest.
- Does not seem to respond to their name, to sounds, or to your voice.
- Makes very little eye contact or shows little interest in interacting with people.
- Has very limited babbling, gestures, or words compared with other children the same age.
- Seems unusually stiff or floppy, or has trouble using their body compared with peers.
- Shows severe, frequent distress that is hard to soothe, or very little emotion.
- Has trouble with eating, growth, sleeping, hearing, or vision that worries you.

## Routine checks

Take your child to regular health check-ups and ask about developmental screening, as well as hearing and vision checks. The CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early" program offers free milestone checklists and tips for parents. If a doctor suggests an evaluation, do not wait. Early support, such as speech therapy or early intervention services, works best when it starts early.

### A final word of encouragement

Raising a child is hard work, and you are doing something important. Looking after your own sleep, health, and support network is also part of caring for your child. Ask for help from family, friends, or professionals when you need it.

## TAKE ACTION

# Your 30-Day Starter Plan

Do not try to do everything at once. Use this plan to build one habit at a time. Tick off each week and keep what works for your family.

| Week   | Focus                       | Daily actions                                                                                                                                    |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Week 1 | Connection and sleep        | 10 minutes of undistracted play or talk. Practice serve and return at one routine. Start a simple bedtime routine and keep a regular sleep time. |
| Week 2 | Talk, sing, and read        | Read one book daily. Narrate daily tasks. Sing one song or rhyme together. Ask your child one open question each day.                            |
| Week 3 | Play, movement, and screens | Play outdoors or move for at least 30 minutes extra. Make one screen-free time (such as meals). Choose open-ended toys and rotate them.          |
| Week 4 | Food and feelings           | Add one nutritious food to meals. Eat together without screens. Name your child's feelings out loud. Praise effort once a day.                   |

### Weekly check-in

At the end of each week, ask yourself: What worked? What was hard? What is one small change I can keep? Celebrate your effort.

## A Sample Daily Routine (ages 2 to 5)

| Time         | Activity                                                                            |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Morning      | Wake-up and cuddles. Breakfast together. Chat about the day. Active play or a walk. |
| Late morning | Free play, a creative activity (drawing, blocks), and a healthy snack.              |
| Midday       | Lunch together. Quiet time or a nap depending on age.                               |
| Afternoon    | Outdoor play and movement. A story, songs, or helping with a simple task.           |
| Evening      | Family dinner, screen-free. Bath, pajamas, and a calm wind-down.                    |
| Bedtime      | Story, lullaby, cuddle, lights out at the same time each night.                     |

This is only an example. Adjust it to your family's culture, work schedule, and your child's needs.

## Trusted Resources

- **Harvard Center on the Developing Child** ([developingchild.harvard.edu](https://developingchild.harvard.edu)): research and practical tips, including serve and return.

- **World Health Organization (WHO):** guidance on breastfeeding, nutrition, physical activity, and screen time for children.
- **UNICEF:** parenting and early childhood development resources.
- **American Academy of Pediatrics** (HealthyChildren.org): parenting and child health information.
- **CDC, Learn the Signs. Act Early:** milestone checklists and when to seek help.
- **Zero to Three:** tips on early development, language, and behavior.

Thank you for reading. Wishing you and your child joy, patience, and many wonderful moments together.