

Building Baby's Brain

Creating Consistency

The developing brain thrives on repetition. When a baby experiences the same things over and over, the pathways of connections in her brain become stronger and more complex. One of the best ways to provide repetition for the developing brain is to create consistency in the child's world. When a child has experiences in a positive and predictable environment, her brain becomes wired to relate to others, regulate behavior, and learn. When a child experiences consistent care, she feels more secure because her basic needs are being met, and she has more energy to explore and learn.



► What Is Consistency?

Children develop emotional security when their world is nurturing, consistent, and predictable. As children experience the same routines over and over, the brain strengthens connections that will lead to trust and secure attachments. Children who live in consistent environments also learn to regulate their own emotions and behavior better, because they know what to expect of the world around them. Consistency may include any or all of the following components:

- **Predictability.** Doing things in predictable ways builds a baby's trust of adults. When adults respond every time a baby cries, he learns that that adult will be there to take care of his needs. It is important to give infants the security that comes from meeting her needs when she is hungry, sleepy, or in the mood to play. An older child can wait longer to have her needs met, but a hungry infant cannot be expected to wait until a specific time for another feeding. In fact, a baby who is hungry and is regularly forced to wait for her feeding learns that adults cannot be trusted to meet her basic needs.
- **Routines.** Keeping the same general routine every day helps make the child's world feel stable and predictable. Doing certain things in the same order at about the same time every day helps strengthen brain connections and builds the baby's confidence because she knows what to expect in a situation. A child also learns to be more self-sufficient when the routine is the same every day, because she can anticipate what comes next. Even though young children cannot tell time, they remember the order in which things occur.

- **Keeping the child environment in order.** Order helps a child know what to expect, which helps him feel secure and in control. He knows his toothbrush will be in the cup by the sink. He can find the blocks in the building center. He learns where to put things when he is finished with them so he can find them again later. Keeping the environment organized can reduce frustration and stress for children as well as adults.
- **Setting and enforcing rules.** Rules help children learn acceptable and unacceptable behavior, practice self-control, and strengthen brain connections that will enable good decision-making as children grow. Rules need to be appropriate to the child's age, and adults need to enforce rules consistently.

► What Can You Do?

- **Respond reliably when your baby cries.** Your baby depends on you to meet all of his basic needs. When your baby cries or otherwise lets you know he needs something, try to respond promptly in



ways that are appropriate to his age, his physical and emotional development, and the situation. Remember that an older child may be able to wait for a short time, but a young baby depends on you to respond right away.

- **Set up and follow a realistic daily routine.** Make the daily routine regular. Set up rituals for bedtime, meals, and other times of day, and follow them consistently. When your child is under stress, keeping the routine as regular as possible may help reduce her anxiety. This does not mean you need to be rigid about the daily routine. Flexibility is also important because routines sometimes need to vary a bit from day to day. As your child grows, routines will also change to accommodate her growth. Whenever possible, prepare your child ahead of time for major changes in routine.
- **Give your child appropriate rules.** Adults need to agree on a small number of simple rules for their child. Keep rules short enough to remember, and phrase them positively whenever possible (e.g., “walk in the hallway” instead of “don’t run”). Remind your child of the rules regularly, and gently redirect him whenever he is not following a rule.
- **Reinforce positive behaviors.** When your child is kind or helpful, recognize her efforts and thank her. This helps build her sense of accomplishment and encourages her to continue being kind to others.
- **Keep child care providers as consistent as possible.** Some parents think that changing child care providers regularly is a good thing. But your child thrives on stable, positive, and predictable relationships, both in the family and in child care. Changing child care providers too often is disruptive because your child has to build a new relationship with each new caregiver. Some parents worry that their child will love them less if he becomes attached to a child care provider. This is absolutely false. Having the same warm, loving caregiver helps your child build security and trust.
- **Avoid rigidity, inflexibility, and excessive control.** Consistency is important for the developing brain, but life is not always predictable. When the unexpected happens, your child’s routines and rules sometimes have to change. Having a regular routine and responding reliably help build your child’s sense of security, and enable him to adjust—with your help—when things are different. Rigid insistence that nothing in your child’s world can change, or trying to control everything that affects your child, may actually increase stress in the family and make your child more irritable and anxious.



Selected References:

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