



# TOP 10 THINGS EVERY CHILD NEEDS FOR THE BEST START IN LIFE



At birth, an infant's brain is only 25 percent of the size of an average adult's brain. Incredibly, by 3 years of age, a child's brain has grown to 90 percent of that of an adult. During infancy and early childhood, children are flooded with new experiences that impact their brain development. The first 3 years of a child's life offer parents an amazing opportunity (and accompanying responsibility) to shape their child's growth and form healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

FIRST 5 Santa Cruz County has provided parents and caregivers with the following Top 10 Things to help give children the best start in life.

## Tip #1: Encourage Interaction

A child's brain grows based on early experiences at home. The more interactions a child has, the healthier his/her development will be.

### What Can Parents Do?

- Respond quickly to your baby's needs
- Speak in a soft, slow voice
- Get down to your child's level; involve yourself in your child's play
- Engage your child in conversation
- Be present in your child's life

## Tip #2: Offer Physical Affection

Physical affection communicates love to young children, which in turn fosters positive emotional growth.

### What Can Parents Do?

- Be gentle and responsive to your baby's cues
- Massage your infant
- Hold your child when feeding him/her
- Rock your baby and look into his/her eyes
- Hold your child on your lap when playing or reading
- Hug your child often

## Tip #3: Provide a Stable Relationship

Children who have a stable relationship with at least one caregiver learn at a faster pace, feel better about themselves, and make friends more easily.

### What Can Parents Do?

- Hold your child on your lap during stressful situations, such as a doctor's visit
- Be a loving, consistent presence for your child
- Create an environment that allows your child to explore, but set limits to show both guidance and care
- Be predictable, nurturing and calm when interacting with your child

## Tip #4: Maintain a Safe, Healthy Home

Creating a safe and healthy home environment allows you to maximize your child's growth with minimal risk.

### What Can Parents Do?

- Child-proof your home
- Use age-appropriate car seats
- Be aware of the dangers of lead poisoning found in old paint chips and paint dust
- Feed your child a healthy, nutritious diet and avoid sugar-sweetened beverages
- Visit your child's physician and dentist regularly
- Ensure your child is up-to-date on immunizations
- Encourage outdoor play and exercise

### Tip #5: Develop Strong Self-Esteem

A strong sense of self is the foundation for healthy development in young children.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Recognize and celebrate that every child is unique from birth
- Discover who your child is and value his/her identity
- Encourage your child to express himself/herself
- Praise your child with concrete positive feedback
- Respect your child and teach him/her to respect himself/herself and others



### Tip #6: Choose Quality Childcare

Since childcare settings can be a primary learning environment for children, the quality of the childcare setting is very important.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Take an active role in selecting the best childcare for your child
- Visit the childcare center with your child to determine your child's comfort level
- Ask yourself these questions when selecting childcare:
  - Is it a safe, supportive environment?
  - Do they serve nutritious food?
  - Do the childcare providers appear to enjoy interacting with the children?
  - What are the ratios of caregivers to children? Look for the following ratios: 1 caregiver: 3 - 4 children (ages 0 - 3)
  - Do the adults speak respectfully to the children and encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings?
  - Are the adults down on the floor playing with the children?
  - Does the center welcome parental involvement?
  - Do the children appear happy?

### Tip #7: Engage in Conversation

Communicating with your child not only shows love, but also encourages the development of his/her speech patterns.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Talk to your baby, early and often
- Sing to and with your child
- Use a broad vocabulary to expose your child to many different words
- Engage your child in conversation
- Read aloud to your child and ask questions of him/her

### Tip #8: Promote Play

Playing provides children with an outlet for imagination and creativity and fosters healthy brain development.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Be your child's playmate, engage in their play
- Encourage play by using everyday household items in creative ways
- Get to know your child through play



### Tip #9: Make Music

Music offers children an outlet for expression and stimulates brain development in specific areas including language and reasoning.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Involve your child in music
- Sing, clap, rock, dance, tap your feet together with your child
- Encourage your child to make his/her own music using household items
- Play music in your home and encourage your child to sing and dance

### Tip #10: Make Reading a Priority

Reading with children demonstrates a love for books and learning, and is a wonderful way for parents and children to spend quality time together.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Read to your child everyday
- When you read to your child, hold him/her on your lap
- Point to pictures and ask questions
- Repeat the same book to help your child make the connection between the written page and the spoken word
- Write down a story your child tells you - show them their words in writing

The first 3 years of life are the most critical in terms of encouraging healthy development. It is important for parents to start as soon as possible to build the foundation that will help their children reach their full potential. The good news is that what every child needs, every parent can give. If we care for our children and give them what they need early in life, their future will be full of possibilities.

