



Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators

# Building Brains

in the First 36 Months of Life



## **Building Brains in the First 36 Months of Life**

---

Based on the *New Jersey Birth to Three Early Learning Standards*, these cards are designed for parent use, and for others who hold and care for their infants and toddlers. We encourage you to explore the full version of these standards at: <https://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/standards/birth/standards.pdf>

Produced in 2013 by the **New Jersey Council for Young Children**.

The standards were adopted/adapted with permission from **Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to Three**.

Copyright © 2020 Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators CITE.  
All Rights Reserved.



**Note to Parents**

## **Note to Parents:**

---

Babies learn best through their relationships with supportive and caring adults. The adults holding our babies in the first three years of life are helping to build 85% of their developing brains.

This makes YOU their first teacher.

You do not need a teaching certificate; all you need is to build trust between you and your baby. Responding to your child's needs and providing them with a secure, safe and loving environment is the foundation for building strong and healthy brains.

These cards are designed for you to engage and play with your baby in order to build trust, encourage exploration and build brains!



## How to Use the Cards

©The White Ribbon Alliance. All rights reserved. | <https://flic.kr/p/UZK2Z3>

## Using These Cards:

---

These cards are arranged according to the five areas of infant development: **Social & Emotional**; **Approaches to Learning**; **Language Development and Communication**; **Cognitive Development**; and **Physical and Motor Development**.

- Each area or domain, is color coded.
- Each section is made of three or four components for you to focus on with baby.
- For each component, there will be a strategy to try with your infant or toddler.

## Ages & Stages:

---

The infant toddler time period is divided into four ages & stages when change in development is occurring:



**Young Infants**  
(Birth to 9 months)



**Older Infants**  
(8 to 18 months)



**Young Toddlers**  
(16 to 26 months)



**Older Toddlers**  
(24-36 months)



**Things to Keep in Mind**

## Things to Keep in Mind:

---

- All children reach developmental milestones in their own time and in their own way.
- Development may be uneven; some children may speak many words before they walk.
- Your child is a multitasker; many activities will cross the span of two or more developmental areas.
- Make every moment count! Put away your cell phone and fully engage with your child; let them know that you prefer them over your phone or a screen.
- Keep in mind, babies can sense, share and experience the emotions of the caregivers. Before you hold or interact with your baby, check to make sure you are feeling calm and ready to engage.
- Keep your infant close – hold them – talk with them – this builds a trusting relationship.





## **Social & Emotional Development**

To develop relationships with others based on trust and emotional security. The love and trust you establish with your child is the foundation for building the other areas of their development.



**There is no such thing as a baby.  
There is a baby and someone.**

Dr. Donald Winnicott



**Trust & Emotional Security**

## Strategies to Promote Trust & Emotional Security

---

Build trust and feel emotionally secure and supported from adults.



Watch your baby's cues to learn their needs. It takes time to learn their meaning. Respond and wait for their reaction. Repeat as needed.



"Stranger anxiety" may be setting in. When leaving, reassure your baby about what is happening or who is in the room and always say "goodbye."



Be attentive to provide a sense of security when your young toddler explores and plays on their own.



Read stories and look at familiar photos of adults who interact with your child. This helps increase your child's circle of trusted adults.



**Self-Awareness**

## Strategies to Promote Self-Awareness

---

To promote the perception of self.



Share your feelings by using your facial expressions, tone of voice and language when conversing with your baby. Recognize, respect and identify your baby's feelings with words and facial expressions that will help to identify what your baby might be feeling.



While looking in the mirror, point/touch and name the baby's body parts.



Use a mirror to help your young toddler recognize their feelings. Give a name to those feelings; mad, sad, happy. Ask them what happy looks like or what sad looks like. Assure them that being sad or mad is okay.



Accept that this age is ALL about them! Their self-identity is all about ME and MINE. Allow it to happen. Sharing is not in their wheelhouse, although it can be introduced and modeled and reinforced.



**Self-Regulation**

## Strategies for Promoting Self-Regulation

---

Manage physical and emotional reactions to sensations and events.



Observe baby's responses to stressful situations and their way of seeking comfort and coping with the stress. Help the baby find ways of calming themselves by reducing distractions, bright lights, loud noises.



When your baby is distressed allow time for them to rest, cuddle or be nurtured so they can restore the ability to regulate and manage their own actions, emotions or behavior. Just like adults, babies need to have a break from overstimulation and replace chaos with calm.



Maintain consistent daily routines when possible. This will help toddlers know what to expect and react accordingly. Acknowledge and accept some negative or uncooperative behavior as a sign of asserting themselves.



Model language that reflects the behavior you want to see in your toddler: walk, quiet touch, gentle touch. This will reinforce the behavior, the language and the action that you want your toddler to regulate and gain self-control.





**Promoting Relationships**

## Strategies for Promoting Relationships

---

Build relationships and social connections with adults and children.



Allow your baby to interact with other infants and toddlers. Keep in mind that the baby is safe and not overwhelmed or overstimulated.



Allow older children to talk and play with your mobile infant; have them bring a toy to them or sing a song with them or read a book.



Have a play date with one or two other children. Provide a variety of toys to play with. Duplicates of favorites make things easier. Stay close to help with "gentle touches."



Encourage your toddler to learn other children's names. Take photos of children they know so that they can remember and name them.



## Approaches to Learning

Support your child's ability to approach the world with curiosity, persistence, creativity and a sense of wonder.



**...each child is born with a certain temperament; flexible, fearful or feisty. Or they may be any combination of the three. A child's temperament determines the way they approach new experiences, environments, materials or people. We must respect their temperament to allow the children opportunities to adjust accordingly.**

WestEd/PITC/Programs for Infant/Toddler Caregivers



**Curiosity**

## Strategies to Promoting Curiosity

---

Develop a healthy curiosity and interest in things, people and surroundings.



Introduce a variety of materials and allow your infant to decide which will become favorites.



Offer materials to explore all of the senses. Show delight when your child makes a new discovery.



Offer “messy activities” such as water/bubbles, finger paint, mud pies. They may be unsure about participating. Respect that choice; try again later.



Spend time outdoors exploring nature. Expand the experience by identifying objects with lively words.



**Persistence**

## Strategies to Promote Persistence

---

Stay with challenging activities when encountering obstacles.



Allow your baby to thoroughly explore new objects. Avoid intervening too soon. Wait to see if they conquer challenges on their own. Avoid loud noises and distractions when baby is exploring new objects.



Provide a variety of materials for baby to shake, pound, mouth and carry.



Repeat! Repetition means mastering new skills and knowledge. Add new materials to the environment for child to explore.



Provide more challenging games, puzzles and construction materials as toddler learns to solve simpler ones.





**Creativity**

## Strategies to Promote Creativity

---

Develop the ability to invent and try new things.



Help baby experience sights and sounds inside and outside.



Provide action toys (cars, trains, animals) and sensory materials (crinkly paper, bumpy rubber blocks, small containers, textured cloth).



Music and movement activities provide toddlers with the chance to move their bodies to sounds and rhythms. They explore concepts such as fast and slow, loud and quiet.



Give toddlers opportunities to help with food preparation. They love to pour, mix, cut up soft fruits and vegetables and taste. This can also help toddlers to try different foods.

A young child with dark hair is shown from the waist up, shirtless, wearing white shorts with a yellow tag. The child is holding a light-colored cloth with dark horizontal stripes to their face, appearing to be sniffing or touching it. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with a dark brown curtain visible on the right side. The entire image is framed by a white border with rounded corners.

**Initiative**

## Strategies to Help Engage in Interactions

---

Engage others in interactions and to initiate actions or behaviors.



Provide a variety of toys and experiences (books and songs).  
Hold baby while singing or reading a book.



Let the baby choose from a variety of familiar books, toys or materials. Store materials on low shelves or in baskets on the floor so they can self-select.



Encourage them to put on their own socks or shirt. It might take longer but it will give them confidence to take the initiative when getting dressed.



Offer toddler reasonable, limited and acceptable choices ("Do you want to wear the red socks or the blue socks?").



## Language Development & Communication

To acquire language and the ability to communicate effectively with others.

**Babies are wired from birth to communicate. It can take the form of crying, laughing, babbling, pointing or stringing words together to form a sentence. Babies learn to understand language as well as express language as part of the developmental process. For infants and toddlers who come from families whose native language is not English, it is important to nurture their home languages as well as English.**

A young child with short brown hair, wearing a grey hoodie and a denim vest, is smiling broadly while holding a bright red toy telephone. The child is standing in front of a blue structure, possibly part of a playground. The background is slightly blurred, showing wooden beams and greenery. The entire image is framed by a white border with rounded corners.

**Listening & Understanding**

## Strategies to Promote Listening & Understanding

---

To listen and to understand language and other forms of communication.



Repeat familiar words and gestures that accompany your actions when taking care of or interacting with your baby. (e.g., use the sign for “all done” when you are finished diapering or feeding your baby.)



Slow down your pace of conversation with your baby. Their listening, hearing and understanding are still maturing. Give them time to respond.



Say and add examples of what your child is doing to give words and meaning to the actions they are experiencing.



Sit with your child at meal times, an ideal time to discuss taste, temperature, texture, color and math concepts of more/less.





**Communicating & Speaking**

## Strategies to Promote Communicating & Speaking

---

Produce language including sounds, gestures, signs, words and phrases.



Build your baby's language by imitating sounds and gestures. Repeat this play with sounds often.



Use new and familiar words or sign language with your baby and look for ways to repeat them in different settings and situations.



Describe actions that your toddler does while they do them: "you are running, jumping, dancing and sitting." Encourage your toddler to repeat these actions and these words.



Include your toddler in family conversations by taking turns with questions, comments and responses. Use words to describe things often with your child, "You're wearing my favorite blue and white striped shirt today." Notice when they start describing, too.

A photograph of a man and a young child sitting on the floor, engaged in a drawing activity. The man, on the left, is wearing a light grey button-down shirt over a white t-shirt and is smiling as he looks at the child. He is holding an orange marker. The child, on the right, has a large, curly afro hairstyle and is wearing a light grey t-shirt and blue jeans. The child is focused on drawing with a green marker on a piece of paper. A black mesh pencil holder is visible on the right side of the frame. The background is a simple, light-colored room.

**Literacy Skills**

## Strategies to Promote Literacy Skills

---

Develop skills and behaviors that relate to later reading and writing.



Talking, singing, repeating rhymes or finger plays will motivate your baby to listen and focus on you and what you're doing. Offer your baby simple picture or board books showing everyday objects and familiar routines.



Use a variety of books over and over again when baby shows interest. Make a photo book of family members, familiar people and things in the house or neighborhood. "Read" aloud to your toddler about what they see on each page.



Make board books available for your toddler to choose on their own. Provide paper and large crayons for your toddler to begin to "write." Encourage scribbling. It is a toddler's way of learning how to draw letters and numbers. Keeping choking hazards, like marker tops, out of toddler's reach.




Let your toddler dictate a story describing pictures they draw. Listening and writing down their words tells your toddler that you value their efforts and what they have to say. Display their work where you can both see and talk about it again. Repeat often over time.



## Cognitive Development

Using their five senses to explore and discover what things are and how they work.

To develop new skills and process information through play and interactions with others and the environment.



**Play and exploration go together. For example, when babies play with a ring stack or shape-sorter, they're learning about the relationship between objects of different sizes and shapes. They are learning which objects go together when they fill and dump. They're solving problems through trial and error when they turn the crank and the jack-in-the-box pops up.**

[zerotothree.org](http://zerotothree.org)



**Exploration & Discovery**

## Strategies to Promote Exploration & Discovery

---

Encourage exploration and discovery of materials and the environment.



When your baby is awake, place on their tummy for short periods of time and provide a few objects of varying sizes, color, and texture to explore.



Provide opportunities to use containers with lids, stacking and nesting toys and wait to see how they use them.



Introduce toys that challenge your toddler's skills, such as push and pull toys, knob puzzles, sorting and matching objects.



Comment on the colors, shapes, sizes, numbers, and patterns as you observe them in the toddler's play materials.





**Memory**

## Strategies for Promoting Memory

---

Develop the ability to hold and remember an idea.



Provide consistent routines so your baby learns to anticipate what will happen next.



Play games, such as peek-a-boo, or hiding a toy under a blanket, gesturing and asking “where did it go?”



Sing favorite songs over and over again. Ask your toddler to fill in the blank or remember the last word of a phrase in the song.



Talk about past and future events by asking your toddler: “Where did you go yesterday?” “What did you eat for breakfast this morning?” “What book will we read at bedtime tonight?”

A photograph of a man with glasses and a brown sweater sitting on the floor, looking at a young child with curly hair wearing a yellow shirt. The child is reaching out with their hand towards the man's face. In front of them are several colorful wooden blocks (red, yellow, blue, green) and a small wooden house structure. The scene is set indoors with a window in the background.

**Problem Solving**

## Strategies to Promote Problem Solving

---

Build and practice skills to find solutions to everyday problems.



Encourage your baby to reach by placing objects just beyond their grasp so they have to move to get them.



When your baby encounters a problem, offer support or suggestions but avoid intervening too quickly. Give your baby a chance to solve it and then comment that they solved it themselves!



There is more than one way to solve a problem. Allow your toddler to show their creativity and imagination by figuring it out their way.



Ask questions and express wonder about a problem they solved in the past and ask them to remember what they did to solve it.



**Imitation & Symbolic Play**

## Strategies to Promote Imitation & Symbolic Play

---

Copy others and use objects to pretend.



Imitate baby's faces and sounds ("oooo", "ahhhh", "mmm" "dddd"), watch and listen to see if your baby imitates you.



Provide real or toy objects (cups, spoons, bowls, blocks, soft dolls) for pretend play. Notice and encourage when the baby uses an object to represent something else such as holding a block to their ear and talks as if it is a phone.



Model sounds that animals or cars make and listen to the ways that your toddler uses these sounds during play.



Provide material that represents your toddler's experiences (dress-up clothes, pots and pans, tools, dolls, animals, cars, empty food boxes) and observe them making sense of their world by using these objects.



## Physical & Motor Development

Supporting this stage is crucial to maintain health and well-being.



**The physical, gross and fine motor skills that emerge during the infant and toddler stages of development affect the young child's connections with others. Infants and toddlers learn about themselves, others and their environment through the use of their motor skills and their increasing ability to coordinate their hands, arms, legs and their whole body.**

New Jersey Birth to Three Early Learning Standards





**Gross Motor Development**

## Strategies to Promote Gross Motor Development

---

Encourage movements involving the arms and legs or the whole body.



During awake playtimes, give your baby time to play on their tummy and on their back. This gives them opportunities to strengthen their neck, upper body, legs and arms. Offer many opportunities to move freely.



Provide safe opportunities to roll, crawl, pull themselves up and cruise around furniture, developing and strengthening muscles for walking.



Provide safe materials that allow your toddler to push, pull and drag. Provide opportunities to run, jump, climb and dance.



Visit parks and playgrounds that offer safe and supervised experiences and equipment that will strengthen their large muscles. Stay close and allow your toddler to master these new experiences on their own.



## Fine Motor Development

## Strategies to Promote Fine Motor Development

---

Encourage movement that involves the feet, hands and fingers.



Provide safe materials that offer practice in reaching, grasping and releasing. Picking up food from a tray and bringing it to their mouth is using their pincer grasp (thumb and finger), hand/eye coordination and the knowledge that ("I can eat this food!").



Use fingerplays or songs with actions to encourage your baby to imitate the motions.



Provide knobbed puzzles and a variety of manipulatives such as stacking blocks and magnet tiles.



Use different types of paper to tear and crumple. Introduce different writing tools of varying sizes for drawing (markers, crayons, pencils, paintbrushes).

A photograph of a woman wearing a beige hijab and a yellow shirt, smiling warmly as she brushes a young child's teeth. The child is wearing a colorful striped shirt and is holding a blue toothbrush. The background shows a white tiled wall with a metal grab bar, suggesting a bathroom setting. The entire image is framed by a white rounded rectangle.

**Physical Growth**

## Strategies to Promote Physical Growth

---

Build positive feelings about caring for body and health.



Pay attention to signs that your baby can hear noises and voices, and see lights and actions.



Talk to your baby about your care routines as you do them; changing the diaper, eating and sleeping. "Your diaper is wet, let's get ready to change you."



Offer a variety of nutritious foods daily. Provide your toddler with a spoon or fork and a cup to use to begin to develop self-feeding skills.



Provide a child-sized toothbrush and child toothpaste and brush teeth on a regular basis to develop and practice self-care and healthy well-being.

A photograph of a baby being held by a man. The baby is looking towards the camera with a curious expression. The man is looking down at the baby. The image is framed with a white border. A black box with the word "Concerns" is overlaid on the bottom left.

**Concerns**

## Concerns:

---

Being aware of early warning signs for developmental concerns can help you seek more information and assistance. Share your concerns with your pediatrician or nurse if you are concerned with any aspect of your child's development.

### What to look for:

- Little or no eye contact at any age
- No response to loud sounds or noises
- Does not support head by 3 months or roll over in any direction by 5 months
- Does not smile on their own by 5 months
- Does not babble by 8 months
- Does not walk by 18 months
- Little interest in other children by 24 months

For a complete list of concerns go to: [www.state.nj.us/education/birthtothree](http://www.state.nj.us/education/birthtothree)





## Resources

## Resources:

---

- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): [www.healthychildren.org/](http://www.healthychildren.org/)
- Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health at MSU: [www.montclair.edu/center-for-autism-and-early-childhood-mental-health](http://www.montclair.edu/center-for-autism-and-early-childhood-mental-health)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): "Learn the Signs. Act Early." [www.cdc.gov/actearly](http://www.cdc.gov/actearly)
- Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators: [www.NJCITE.org](http://www.NJCITE.org)
- Grow NJ Kids: Quality child care resource: [www.grownjkids.gov](http://www.grownjkids.gov)
- Help Me Grow NJ: Call 2-1-1 to get connected to early childhood resources.
- New Jersey Association for Infant Mental Health: [www.nj-aimh.org](http://www.nj-aimh.org)
- Parent Link: Early Childhood Parenting and Professional Resource Center: [www.njparentlink.nj.gov](http://www.njparentlink.nj.gov)
- SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN): [www.spanadvocacy.org](http://www.spanadvocacy.org)
- ZERO TO THREE: National resource for parents: <https://www.zerotothree.org/parenting>



## Acknowledgments

## Acknowledgments:

---

The expertise and talent of the following agencies and organizations is greatly appreciated in bringing these cards to those who hold, play and care for infants and toddlers.

- New Jersey Association for Infant Mental Health (NJ-AIMH)
- New Jersey Council for Young Children (NJCYC)
- Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators (CITE)
- SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)

