



## *Love Grows Brains: How to Nurture Your Child*

“Juggling the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities leaves many parents feeling like they do not have nearly enough time with their children. But even small acts of kindness, protection, and caring—a hug, a smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Research shows that babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and competent. Research also shows that a consistent relationship with a caring adult in the early years is associated with better grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress later in life.

“Infant brains develop best when a few stable caregivers work to understand and meet the infant’s need for love, affection, and stimulation. Conversely, neglectful and abusive parenting can have a negative effect on brain development.”

Excerpt from Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). Preventing child maltreatment and promoting well-being: A network for action 2013 resource guide. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau.

The quality of care that an infant receives early in life changes the infant’s body chemistry. There is a visible difference between the brains of young children reared in a loving way and those who suffer abuse and neglect. Hormones that are essential for brain and heart development are blocked. Bruce Perry (2002), an expert in child trauma, offers the extreme example by showing an image of a healthy 3-year-old brain side by side with an image of a neglected 3-year-old’s brain. Both the size and amount of development in the brain are remarkably reduced in the brain of the neglected child. Quite literally, “love grows brains.”

The relationship between infant and parent or other caregiver is the foundation of the infant’s healthy growth and development. This relationship also influences the child’s future relationships with peers and other adults. For infants and older children alike, this relationship—also called attachment—is formed through nurturing.

### *Everyday Ways to Nurture Infants*

#### *Feeding Time*

- When breastfeeding or bottle feeding, make eye contact and speak to your infant in a calm, soothing voice.
- Talk to your infant while preparing baby food and during feeding to help her learn patience and language.
- Allow your infant to experience the soothing power of touch by gently stroking her cheek, hair, and back.

#### *Play Time*

- Pay attention to what your infant is doing, and follow his lead. If he reaches for the blocks, help him build and talk to him about what is happening. Focusing on your child is the key to nurturing.
- Play simple games, such as peek-a-boo, passing a block back and forth, and making silly faces at each other. These games are the way your infant begins to learn communication skills.

#### *Travel Time*

- Talk to your infant about what you see out the window, naming colors and shapes as you see them. Respond to her babbles as if she is adding something to the conversation.
- Sing repetitive songs. Even young infants begin to learn the sounds of language, and may sing along long before talking.

#### *Bath Time*

- Use bath time as an opportunity for more than just washing. During bath time, your infant has your full attention, and it can be a good time to connect and have fun together..
- Play copycat games, such as taking turns squeezing a bath toy, or pouring water from a cup.
- Encourage your infant's curiosity by paying attention to what he is exploring. For example, allow him to try grasping a stream of water poured from a cup, and share in his fascination.

#### *Ways to nurture older children:*

As children grow, nurturing by parents and other caregivers remains important for healthy physical and emotional development.

- Make time to listen to them.
- Be involved and interested in their school and other activities.
- Stay aware of the child or teen's interests and friends.
- Be willing to advocate for the child when necessary.

(From Lerner, Dombro & Levine, 2000)

Adapted from the Following

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). Preventing child maltreatment and promoting well-being: A network for action 2013 resource guide. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau.

Lerner, C., Dombro, A., & Levine, K. (2000). The magic of everyday moments. Washington, DC: Zero to Three. <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/early-development/magic-of-everyday-moments.html>

Perry, B.D. (2002) Childhood experience and the expression of genetic potential: What childhood neglect tells us about nature and nurture. *Brain and Mind*, 3, 79-100.