

Growing Mississippi's Children: Increasing Cognitive Development

At the height of the “Baby Einstein” craze, one out of every three American babies aged 6 months to 2 years had at least one of these educational videos. Parents hoped watching the videos would help their children grow up to be smarter, more successful in school, and more successful in life. Recently, research proved that these videos are not helpful and even may be harmful to children. Many parents are left to wonder: how can I help my child prepare for school? Research says that parents can do simple things to help their children succeed, but some ideas may seem strange at first.

“Cognitive development” means thinking skills, reasoning skills, and language skills (the ability to communicate). Babies can’t talk when they’re born, but they learn that crying, smiling, gesturing, and making eye contact will get their needs met. Most children go through predictable stages, so parents can learn when to introduce new ideas and activities to teach their children without frustrating them. But you don’t have to know everything about child development to help your child succeed. Here are some quick tips for building your child’s brain.

6 Ways to Build Your Child’s Brain

1. *Read, read, and read some more.* Reading every day from the minute your child is born provides a comforting routine, allows time for bonding, and increases her vocabulary. What she hears becomes what she says. What she says becomes what she writes and reads. The more exposure a

child has to a variety of books, the more mental connections she can make as she begins to read on her own. Read the same books over and over if your child shows interest. Repeated readings build connections in the brain. Visit your local library or Mississippi Child Care Resource & Referral center to check out age-appropriate books for free.

2. *Turn off the TV.* Watching television has been shown to increase sleep problems and contribute to obesity and aggression in children. Television exposes children to commercial messages for a variety of products, including unhealthy foods. Even background TV noise has been shown to distract young children from their play. This constant interruption may contribute to attention difficulties and an inability to play alone. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time at all for children under age 2, and no more than an hour or two per day for children older than age 2.
3. *Get outside.* The natural world is full of things to explore. Going outside teaches kids to appreciate the environment and encourages creativity and exercise. Children are scientists, constantly seeking to understand the world around them. Being outside, whether in a backyard, a park, or a schoolyard, gives children many opportunities to explore and experiment. Pouring sand through a funnel, planting seeds and watching them



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grow, watching birds flock around a feeder or splash in a birdbath, or gathering rocks and sticks helps your child understand the world around him.

4. **Play.** Today, free play is disappearing from the lives of children. Many people don't realize how much children need to play. Young children need large blocks of unstructured time and open-ended materials so they can engage in creative play. Creative play fosters many important life skills. For example, make-believe, or dramatic play, develops creativity, patience, and social skills. Playing with blocks increases problem-solving skills and allows kids to learn scientific principles. Blocks and nontoxic art supplies allow children to design, build, and create whatever they can dream up.
5. **Provide a safe and healthy environment.** Children must be safe physically and feel safe emotionally before they can learn. Poverty, stress, parents who smoke, poor nutrition, too little sleep, and unstable relationships can negatively impact a child's ability to succeed. Check your home regularly for safety hazards and toxic chemicals, such as lead, mercury, radon, harmful pesticides, and asbestos. Look for ways to live a healthy life for yourself and your child.

6. **Communicate.** As you talk with your young child, you nurture her vocabulary and understanding of the world around her. You also make your relationship stronger. Building trust at a young age will pay off in many ways, and you don't have to wait until your child is a teenager to appreciate strong communication! Your relationship with your child affects her relationships with her friends, with other adults, and with the world in general. Remember, you are your child's first teacher. If you teach her to become an observer, a recorder, a thinker – and to communicate with others about what she sees and thinks – you're building the brain power she needs to succeed. You can help by becoming actively engaged with your child. Put down the cell phone, turn off the computer and television, and talk to her. Model active listening and the give-and-take of conversation. Think aloud to show her how to use logic to think through challenges and new experiences.

So go to the library. Read *Green Eggs and Ham* one more time. Get outside. Get dirty. Build. Create.

Explore. Play. Talk. Your child will be smarter for it.

For more information on parenting, child development and child care, visit <http://www.childcaremississippi.org>.

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