



## Raising a little genius

By **Harry Hoffman**

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What does my baby know? When does my baby start to learn? How do you teach a baby?

Twenty-five years ago, the answers to these questions were unclear; there was much conjecture and many hypotheses on just what happens when infants interact with the people and objects in their environment. Observation and testing provided many tantalizing clues, but what was actually going on within those precious little heads still remained a mystery.

In recent years, new and nonintrusive brain-scanning technology has allowed scientists to watch in real time the brain-stimulation effects of a wide range of seemingly simple activities, beginning in the earliest weeks of life.

Thanks to pioneering work by scientists such as Patricia Kuhl and Andrew Meltzoff at the University of Washington's Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, we have learned that each parent-infant interaction, no matter how silly or inconsequential it may seem at the moment, is an exchange of multiple, complex messages and triggers quite specific cerebral activity.

It turns out, infants quickly know an amazing amount of things: Just days after birth, they can recognize familiar faces, smells and sounds; soon after birth they can differentiate every vocal sound produced by human languages (and by six months they have already begun to sort out the common sounds of the languages they hear most frequently). At birth, they begin expressing rudimentary emotional expressions, and by two months they can express more complex emotions, such as sadness or frustration.

While these infants are literally growing smarter daily, their parents are often feeling the opposite effect; the addition of this little genius to the family has thrown their personal and family routines into disarray, priorities are now inverted and diapers and feeding cycles are an obsession they never believed they'd share. All parents need and deserve support in this time of transition.

What to do with this information is the challenge; for many parents in today's two-wage-earner

economy, just spending a few waking hours with their baby is a stretch — especially when it is the baby's sleep schedule that determines when a waking hour occurs.

While we'd all like to give our littlest ones every advantage from day one, parents are overwhelmed with opinions, options and advice, much of it contradictory.

Every nervous new parent wants the best for his or her child, but there are no owner's manuals, no quick-install instructions, and no help desk open at 4 a.m. New parents are often isolated, beginning this new adventure on their own, especially when living far away from their families and friends.

New parents can prepare to be their child's first and best teacher by first acknowledging that none of us can do this alone. Connecting with their peers to share the challenges and opportunities, acknowledging their common needs and sharing resources, information and skills will build confidence and competence in those critical first few months of the adventure of parenting.



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