

# *Understanding Your Baby*

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**A WEEK-BY-WEEK DEVELOPMENT &  
ACTIVITY GUIDE FOR PLAYING  
WITH YOUR BABY FROM BIRTH TO  
12 MONTHS**

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# Introduction

Regardless of who you are, where you come from, what language or languages you speak, you and I (and anyone who considers themselves a parent or caregiver) are each ultimately responsible for raising humans. When we understand more about how humans all over the world develop and learn, we feel more empowered to parent.

Regardless of whether you're a first time or a "seasoned" parent or caregiver, when you have an infant, you are in the thick of it. Becoming a parent (or any type of caregiver - I'll use these words interchangeably throughout) to a new person is an enormous undertaking. Regardless of how much (or how little) we think we know about babies, there is so much to learn. I want you to remember that we *all* feel vulnerable, and we *all* want the best for the children in our care.

This book does not aim to cover the divisive topics on which we tend to stand vehemently behind opposing lines. This is about our babies. This is about you. I want to provide gentle support to help you understand and connect with your baby, so you can move *together* through the first year of caregiving. We mix the developmental research (the science) with the creative ways to support the developmental stages your baby moves through (the art).

We are going to get to the heart of what it is to be a caregiver of infants.

Infants (and toddlers) learn through observation, imitation, and interaction. When we learn more about what “play” looks like using very simple materials, we feel some peace of mind that we all crave as parents. Peace of mind is what we all want: we want to know that we are doing all we can to raise decent human beings.

That’s what I aim to provide at **Strength In Words**. That’s the kind of community that I’m fostering, and that’s what I’d like to begin to offer you with this book. It’s all about finding the joy in the mayhem. Parenting infants and toddlers is crazy – I’m not going to tell you I can take that away... I can’t! What I can do is to help you find the joy in the connection, and start to build the foundation for a lifetime of learning.

## My Journey Into Parenthood

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I was 10 weeks pregnant with my first baby when my husband and I moved across the world. Surrounded by new people, customs, systems, and struck by the newness of the journey toward parenthood, I was very focused on creating connections.

When my baby was born, I decided to combine my professional background and my desire to create a safe, social learning space for myself and my baby along with other caregiver-baby pairs. I started to devise a curriculum that was based on my own developmental knowledge, that of my friends and colleagues in early learning, a ton of developmental research, and information and experiences I integrated as a mother along the way.

Through this process, I learned several things. First, I learned to become more confident as a mother. I learned to listen to myself, to my baby, and to other caregivers, distilling information that was pertinent to me (and to my baby) and of interest to the other caregivers around me. Perhaps most importantly, I learned just how powerful knowledge can be.

There are so many divisive topics in the world of parenthood. In the beginning, I was very fixated on these issues, because the choices we make about how to nourish and support our babies feel all-encompassing in those early days of parenthood. These are individualized, personal choices. I searched for information – and often, I was met with “experts” and “solutions,” when really, what I needed was knowledge. When I stepped back and remembered how much I understood about how babies learn, I began to feel more connected to my baby – and more empowered as a mother to make decisions about all aspects of parenthood. When I shared that information with other caregivers, they felt the same way. Now, I’d like to share it with you.

I also want to encourage you to reach out and find your communities of support. Whether you have friends and family with other small babies, you take advantage of local playgroups, classes, or library story times, it’s the support of other families that keeps us afloat during a year that can have both beautiful highs and dark, dark lows. The opportunity to observe other caregiver-baby pairs and to speak openly and frankly with other parents who are on the same journey offers us a chance to gain some perspective (during a time when it can be very difficult to see past that which is directly in front of us), and to synthesize information.

One of the wonderful benefits of the [Strength In Words Community LAB](#) is that we have created a platform for both

parent support and parent education that can be accessed in the comfort of your own home. Our community hub allows you to connect with other parents and caregivers (all around the world!) on the same journey, asking the same questions, and sharing experiences and ideas – in a facilitated, respectful setting that values education and ideas, rather than one-size-fits-all “advice.” We meet for live virtual events (parent support groups, developmental music classes, and Q&A Workshops with professionals and special guests addressing various areas of early development and family health), we house an ever growing, well-organized resource library, and we are a social network created to help each member feel nurtured – so you can nurture your tiny human. If you’re interested in learning more about the Strength In Words Community LAB, you can find us online at [community.strengthinwords.com](https://community.strengthinwords.com).

## **My Professional Background**

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I want to start by saying that I certainly don’t know everything there is to know about infant development. That said, over the last several years, I’ve sharpened and deepened my professional knowledge as a practicing pediatric speech-language pathologist. I’ve mothered my way through two very different early parenting experiences. I’ve also interviewed countless professionals about the ways we can support infants and toddlers in the areas of cognition, communication, motor/sensory, and social/emotional development, and read a good deal of the developmental research and literature that informs how (and what) we practice as professionals in the world of early child development.

Much of my professional background is in early intervention. I have dedicated my career to working with “early communicators,” primarily with infants and toddlers and their



adult counterparts. In the world of education, the term “early learning” often refers to children who are not yet school-aged, but who are in the pre-school years... but we know that babies are learning from day one (and even before). We know that their parents and caregivers are learning, too.

Those first few years of life set the stage for the rest of our child’s life. Now, I don’t say that to add to the incredible pressure we have as parents and caregivers to “do enough” for our children. That weight is already more than sufficiently heavy! In my mind, it’s about simplification. We desperately need to simplify our lives. We need access to quality over quantity. Our children need high quality interactions and opportunities to engage with the world, *not* “the latest learning toy.” We, their caregivers, need access to high quality information and high quality interactions, and an opportunity to reflect upon what’s working and what’s not working – *not* a million mommy blogs and fancy craft ideas on Pinterest.

When we (as parents and caregivers) feel confident that we have access to resources that actually make a difference, we feel empowered to do the job of raising tiny humans. As an early interventionist, I strive to work within family-centered practice. This means that I help families maximize the opportunities for play and development within naturally occurring, everyday activities, and using materials that already exist within the home. Instead of being the therapist who walks into a family’s home with a “magical” bag of therapy materials, I see my job as that of a facilitator or coach, helping families see the power of routines-based intervention, and focusing on “routines” that are most important to that family. A routine is any activity that is regularly occurring, that has fairly predictable steps, and that has a clear beginning and end. We all engage in different kinds of routines in our homes – caregiving routines (e.g., eating, dressing, washing), play routines (e.g., infant

massage, dance parties, book-reading), social routines (e.g., performing a finger play, playing peek-a-boo, tickling), and daily tasks (e.g., getting the mail, putting on shoes before we go outside). When we can identify these and maximize their value, we can make a huge difference within simple activities (that we're already doing)!

At *Strength In Words*, we create resources to improve the quality of your family's interactions by sharing easily digestible information that increases your knowledge about early development. Come join our community of families and help us spread the word about Strength In Words.

Thanks for making me part of your journey through parenthood,

Ayelet Marinovich, M.A., CCC-SLP

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# *On Early Development and Play*

## **You Already Have All The Materials You Need: The Benefits of Open-Ended Play**

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We are already engaging in the kinds of activities that can make a huge impact on our baby's development (caregiving routines, short play routines, and other daily routines). We also already have the materials we need. We all have open-ended play materials lying around our homes, often in plain view. Open-ended materials are simply items that can be used in lots of different ways and in different environments (say, indoors or outdoors), and can be combined and often redesigned or repurposed by a young child in any way that child or her playmates decide.

These materials often allow children to explore and be inventive in the way they are used... babies are naturally inventive, and (depending on your little one's age) you might have already noticed that your baby is often more interested in the regular objects you have lying around the house rather than the fancy toy that the grandparents purchased for the holidays....

Often, young children end up exploring their environment, taking regular objects, and converting them into toys – a prime example of this is the infant who is on the move, sitting up, and able to open the kitchen cabinets to take out her favorite “drum set,” a pot and a pan! An older toddler who is engaging in what’s called “symbolic play,” or the kind of play that uses objects to symbolize and imitate what they’ve seen others doing, might take out the same pot and pan, and a wooden spoon, and start to stir, imitating her parents in the kitchen.

So, open-ended materials often encourage creative thinking in that a child must explore its properties and how it might be used.<sup>1</sup> In addition, when you have a house or play area full of open-ended materials, they can often be used together in new and inventive ways. A scarf or blanket might serve as a great hiding place for a building block or even a Tupperware container (which can then “peek-a-boo!”). A cork might balance beautifully on top of a wooden block or a toothbrush holder, or fit inside a paper towel roll. A coaster might fit inside one cup, but not another.

Open-ended materials often encourage problem-solving.<sup>2</sup> *What fits where? How can I get this to work that way? Can I get that out if I pull this?* Using open-ended materials also tends to save us a lot of money. Not only do we often save money by using common household objects or natural materials instead of expensive electronic gadgets that purport themselves to “teach such and such” skill, our children are going to learn best through exploring, interacting, and imitating us!

Open-ended toys are really just materials that your little one

1. Torelli, L. (1992). The developmentally designed group care setting: A supportive environment for infants, toddlers, and caregivers. In E. Fenichel (Ed.), *Zero to Three child care classics: 7 articles on infant/toddler development* (pp. 37–40). Arlington, VA: Zero to Three/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs.
2. Daly, L., & Beloglovsky, M. (2015) *Loose parts: Inspiring play in young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

can explore, without a set agenda. And when we encourage our tiny people to become more creative, that will serve them well down the road: we encourage them to be active participants in their lives.

## What We Need To Understand About Play With Infants: It Looks Different

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Adults often think of play in adult notions. We might think of “playing a game,” which has rules, follows an often linear trajectory, and depends on others doing things “correctly” to be played. Babies play, too, but it can be difficult to see and to understand what it is they’re doing – or how we can play with them – because it requires a shift in our own mentality. Play for infants (and toddlers) is not terribly linear! When an infant sees a block, she doesn’t automatically think, “this is for stacking and building.” That is something that she will learn over time (and often, she will learn that knocking them down is incredibly fun *before* she discovers the joy in building). When an infant sees a book, he doesn’t automatically think, “let’s read this from cover to cover.” There are layers of skills that emerge over time, through various experiences with those play materials, that lay the foundation for skills such as constructing and reading.

What comes first is observation, exploration, imitation, and interaction. This is why you’ll often hear educators who work with infants and toddlers suggest that you “follow your child’s lead.” If your baby is mouthing a book, block, coaster, or rattle, chances are, she’s learning about it. If she’s banging a maraca against the floor instead of shaking it in the air, she may be experimenting with its properties: how heavy it is, how much force her body requires to push into the floor, which direction her arm can move, how loud something is (and whether it will be so loud the next time around). Young children are constantly

experimenting with the world around them – it’s how they play, and it’s how they learn.

We can model the way we play with an object, giving our baby the chance to observe and imitate. When he’s ready, assuming his body is able to, he will imitate our actions. We can narrate what we’re doing, what our child is doing, provide musical experiences, early literacy experiences, and movement and sensory experiences for our babies. In so doing, we provide our children with the tools to learn, and with an environment that encourages social/emotional development, cognitive development, communication development, and motor development.

### Holistic Learning

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Infants and toddlers learn “holistically,” meaning that although there are various areas of learning and development, they are all very much connected in the first three years of life.

Throughout this period, a child may focus on a certain type of skill or interest in one domain, but process all kinds of information simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> For a further discussion of this topic, please listen to the Strength In Words podcast episode, **“Holistic Learning.”**

The bonding that can form from simply being with your baby allows you as the caregiver to start to watch and read your little one’s interests, preferences, and behaviors even from the first few months. We tend to start paying attention to things like motor abilities and language development later on because it starts to become very obvious when a child is suddenly able to

3. California Department of Education, California Infant/Toddler Curriculum Framework, Sacramento, 2012, pg. 133.

roll over or crawl, or when she starts to wave or say her first word.

We have to remember that these capabilities don't just magically appear the day we witness them – they're the result of layers of learning, practicing, and problem solving. That pointing gesture that is so communicative came from months of your baby experimenting with the way her arm moves up and down (gross motor), practice with isolating a finger (fine motor), attending to the ways you talk to her (cognitive), becoming aware of those around her (social/emotional), and also imitating and understanding that lifting one's finger and pointing in the direction of a person or object can be symbolic of a request or an attempt to draw the attention of another person (communicative).

The point is, we have to learn to give our young children opportunities to experiment and learn, and we need to give our babies the benefit of the doubt that they are learning all the time.

## Questions and Concerns About Development

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The information and activities we will discuss in this book are largely applicable to both typically developing infants, as well as those with developmental delays and special needs. The ideas presented in this book are for informational purposes only and are not medical advice. This book is not meant to replace an individualized treatment plan developed as the result of in-person assessment, clinical observation, and collaboration between therapist and caregiver.

If you are concerned about your child's development or functional abilities, please seek information from your child's pediatrician, or seek out the services of a developmental

pediatrician or local pediatric therapist within a specialty area (i.e., physical therapist, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, etc).

Although I am a registered and licensed speech-language pathologist, this curriculum is *not* a place for therapeutic recommendations or interventions to address specific delays or diagnoses. The ideas presented here are intended to be used for play in a *supervised* setting. If you have questions or concerns about presenting any activity to your infant, speak with your baby's medical professional beforehand.

**Always ensure that you are present and attentive when presenting an activity to your baby.** Strength In Words LLC is not liable for any injury incurred while replicating an activity found within this book.