

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Guide for Parents/Caregivers: Brain Development

Here is what we know about brain development:

- The brain starts developing during pregnancy and grows the most during the first 2000 days (5 to 6 years) of your child's life.
- More than 1 million new brain connections are made each second. The brain continues to develop throughout childhood and into early adulthood.
- A child's genes, their environment, early experiences, and relationships all work together to make these connections and build healthy brains.
- Some stress is a part of everyday life. Too much stress can affect a child's brain development. You can help protect them by responding in a caring and supportive way.
- Healthy nutrition, sleep and exercise are very important for good brain development, health and wellness.

As a parent or caregiver, think about a child's age and developmental abilities, how can you:

- Building a [secure and trusting relationship](#)?
It's like playing a "[serve and return](#)" game like tennis. For example, if your baby babbles or is upset, respond in a positive comforting way by holding them and giving them a hug or kiss.
- Respond to your child's feelings and needs?
It is normal for children to express a wide range of emotions. It is important to comfort your child when they are hurt, sick or upset. For example, soothing your child when they fall down.
- Increase your connection to your child?
Children learn best through real life moments. It is important to [keep screen time to a minimum for you and your child](#). For example, the [Canadian Pediatric Society](#) recommends that children:
 - Under 2 years old do not have any screen time.
 - 2-5 year olds have limited screen time that is less than 1 hour a day.
 - Studies show that less is always better. There is no evidence showing that screen time improves a child's development.
- Build a support system around you?
Parenting is not always easy. Having support can help you get through challenging moments. For example, reach out to supportive family, friends, community programs and resources.
- Know if your child's development is on track for their age?
It is important to have developmentally appropriate expectations of your child's ability and behaviour. For example, the [Looksee Checklist®](#) (formerly Nipissing District Developmental Screen®-NDDS) and the [Early Years Check-In](#) give activities and examples for each age and stage of development.

Where can you find more information?

- [Caring for Kids - Your baby's brain: How parents can support healthy development](#)
- [Healthy Baby, Healthy Brain](#)
- [Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts, Brain Architecture, Serve and Return, Toxic Stress](#)
- [Infant Mental Health Promotion, Comfort Play and Teach](#)
- [City of Hamilton: Parenting with LOVE - Brain Development](#)
- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Brain](#)
- [Zero to three: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health](#)
- [24-Hour Movement and Activity Guidelines](#)

Where can you find support?

- [Parenting in Ottawa](#)
- [Parent Resource Centre](#)
- [211 Ontario](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources](#)