Things You Can Do To Make Your Baby Stronger, Smarter & Healthier

Parents want to give their children every possible advantage in life and, statistically speaking, it appears that each generation is getting a little closer to that goal. Scientists have noted the "Flynn Effect", apparent since the advent of IQ testing a century ago, that each subsequent generation has scored higher than the previous generations in every industrialized nation. American IQs, for example, have consistently risen by an average of 8 points per generation. It is believed that this positive shift is due to improvements in prenatal care, nutrition, health, education, and even parenting skills.

When it comes to intellect, it is believed that 50 percent is owed to genetics and the other 50 percent to environment. But there is much you can do to help your child succeed. The following are seven things you can do to make your baby stronger, smarter and healthier.

Reading

Besides the fact that reading to your child helps to build your child's vocabulary, stimulate imagination, and improve communications skills, it is also a great way to bond and create lasting memories with your child. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends reading aloud to your baby starting at 6 months, while other experts believe it is never too early to start.

Talking to your child

A very narcissistic mother once told me that she couldn't understand why her very bright adult son did not speak until he was three years old. After probing a little further I discovered that she never spoke to him. "I figure he couldn't talk back to me so why bother?" she reasoned. According to Lise Eliot, Ph.D., author of *What's Going On in There? How the Brain and Mind Develop in the First Five Years of Life* "There is a correlation between the number of words a child hears as a baby and his verbal IQ."

In other words, the more you speak to your child, the more developed your child's language skills and intelligence will be. According to a study by Dr. Betty Hart of the University of Kansas and Dr. Todd Ridley of the University of Alaska, babies who heard an average of 2,100 words per hour scored higher on standard tests when they reached the age of three than did children whose parents hadn't been as verbal.

Massage

Infant massage can benefit your child in many ways. Proponents believe it can help improve an infant's stimulation threshold, improve attachment, reduce stress, calm colicky babies, and improve the early bond between parent and child.

When babies are born, the Myelin Sheath, a fatty covering around the nerves which protects the nervous system, speeding the transmission of impulses from the brain to the rest of the body, is not complete. The sensory stimulation of massage speeds that process, helping to develop neural-cell firing which in turn improves brain-body communication.

According to Vimala McClure, the founder of the International Association of Infant Massage, "[massage] triggers physiological changes that help infants grow and develop, stimulating nerves in the brain that facilitate food absorption and lowering stress hormones levels, resulting in improved immune system functioning." She goes on to say that baby massage "can directly affect a child's emotional development and ability to handle stress as an adult."

Studies of premature infants who received massage by nurses in the neonatal unit gained weight faster, performed better on neonatal behavioral tests, and were able to leave the hospital sooner than their counterparts who did not receive massage. Massage isn't just beneficial for preemies. In another study of four-month-old babies who were tested for "novelty preference" (early memory and sensory discrimination skills) babies who were massaged scored significantly higher than control groups. Novelty preference is a strong predictor of later IQ.

Sign Language

When used properly, sign language for hearing children has the ability to help babies to communicate more clearly and much earlier in their development. Because babies are able to coordinate their hand movement before they are able to articulate sounds, baby sign language allows them to communicate more effectively and at any earlier stage. The authors of *Baby Signs* claim that baby sign language leads to better communication, speeds up the process of learning to speak, stimulates intellectual development, enhances self-esteem, and strengthens the bond between parent and infant.

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