

## **Learning Begins Early**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Richard and Carly are aware of recent brain research that suggests children have a much greater capacity for learning very early in life than previously was believed. But what should they do to promote the mental development of their newborn daughter?

Should they start her on a regimen of math flashcards, as Richard's colleague at the office does with his three-month-old son in the hope of developing a prodigy?

Children do have a great capacity for learning very early in life. As their children's first and foremost teachers, parents can contribute to developing that learning potential.

But don't use flashcards or other gimmicks to do so.

Early in life, children should be surrounded with love, an environment that is safe and fun to explore, and parents who encourage creativity and curiosity. Such an environment is simple and inexpensive to create. It is more about parental attitude than toys and gadgets.

Start by responding to your baby as much as possible. When your baby makes a face or a sound, imitate it or smile. And talk to your child often, even if he or she doesn't understand a word you are saying.

Simple pleasures that appeal to the senses also help babies develop. Music, a room filled with bright colors, your singing are examples.

When your child is a year or so, each day can be filled with simple teaching opportunities. Point out different shapes, colors, and textures and let your child explore them. Go outside and point to an object – a tree, bird, whatever is around – then, say its name to your child.

Establish a regular reading schedule and read to your child every day. Keep plenty of books around the house and go to the library. Limit television time and control what your child watches.

Some activities encourage creativity, such as singing songs, listening to music, dancing, building things, and drawing or coloring.

Some physical activities help develop your child's muscles and encourage learning. Playing with a wagon, running, playing with balls, and climbing are activities that help develop large muscles. Playing with clay, cutting and pasting, coloring, painting, and using a pencil help to develop small muscles and promote creativity.

Your goal should not be to create a prodigy. Instead, you and your child should have fun with each other exploring the world. The love of people and learning is the best lesson you can teach.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*