



February 2009

# Daycare

## What under 3's need



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### Rich environments build rich brains

During the first years, neural networks develop and mature in a child's brain to connect and activate brain cells. Denser networks develop in areas that are used often, whilst unused brain cells atrophy (die away) in neglected areas. This means that the quality of a child's day to day experiences largely determines how much of his inborn potential will eventually be unlocked. Parents who have access to a wide variety of ideas to encourage a child's development age-appropriately in all areas can give their children an enormous advantage.

This is exactly why you have invested in a Practica Program and why you are receiving this newsletter!

We just need to get something straight: The Practica Program is no magic wand that can compensate for a lack of love and attention. In fact, without love and attention the system is powerless to make a difference in a child's life.

### Why is it so important to choose the right daycare?

The development of a human child is so complex during the first years that there isn't enough space on its DNA to store all the information needed to program the entire process. As a result, every child's development depends on two interconnected factors: (1) his genetic make-up and (2) the quality of his day-to-day experiences.

Certain milestones in a child's development are more programmed and less dependent on stimulation. A child will, for instance, start to smile, sit independently and walk in his own time - regardless of whether anyone plays games to 'teach' him to do these things or not. He may not be as good at it - but he will do it.

There are, however, other areas of a child's development that are far more sensitive to input from the environment.

A genetically talented child, who hears no language from birth to 3, will acquire no ability to understand or use language - not even when he is older.

In other words, when it comes to language, whether or not a child's potential will be realized depends 100% on the quality of his experiences.

***There is another area of development that is equally sensitive to the quality of a baby and toddler's everyday experiences: the capacity to trust people and enjoy life. Sadly, this is the area that suffers MOST when parents make the wrong choices about daycare.***

### The first three years is your only opportunity to shape your child's basic attitudes

Babies develop at an astounding rate and it's marvelous to watch how they acquire new physical skills, learn to solve problems and become smarter day after day. But, sadly, most parents aren't aware that children acquire attitudes in the same way as they acquire new skills - through a combination of genetic predisposition and daily experiences.

The first 3 years of life is a parent's window of opportunity to shape a child's basic attitudes.

How does this happen?

During the first 33 months of a child's life, most of a child's developmental energy is geared towards wiring the RIGHT side of his brain, which deals mostly with intuition, attitudes and relationships.

From about 3 years onwards, the left side of the brain starts to feature more and children become more logical: they can reason better and give more attention to facts.

But before the 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday, nothing is more important to a child than having a safe attachment with his caregiver.

### What is the caregiver's role?

If the caregiver has the time, energy and inclination to be attuned to the child's emotions, she will model to the child how to regulate his emotions. Without consciously trying, she will literally teach the child, by her example, how to soothe his fears, build excitement, be happy, have fun and calm feelings of rage or anger in himself.

As a result the child develops an emotional language. His personality emerges and blossoms and he develops the capacity to enjoy life. This is emotional intelligence in the making.

Without frequent emotional contact with an emotionally responsive adult a baby simply doesn't learn how to effectively deal with emotions in himself and other people.

He struggles to develop self-control, to learn to motivate himself and to deal with setbacks. He is also more overwhelmed by frustrating situations and seldom communicates his needs in ways other than crying.

***Other than food and shelter, your baby needs one thing more than anything else in this world: a primary caregiver that has the time, energy and inclination to be attuned to his emotions.***

### Love provides the glue needed to wire the brain

In the 1990's a leading neuroscientist, Dr Alan Shore, began working to integrate the findings of the separate fields of neurology and psychology. His goal was to construct an all-encompassing picture of how early experiences influence brain development.

His remarkable books unleashed a flood of new research amongst other scientists. After years of research they concluded that the most important factor that determines how well a young child's brain is wired is the amount of AFFECTION that the child receives.

When a warm and responsive caregiver interacts with a baby or toddler, the child's body secretes a measurable amount of growth hormones that cause neural networks to develop in the brain. Un-emotional learning experiences like staring at a DVD or spending time in the company of other babies don't help.

Loving eye contact with an attentive adult, reassuring comments, touching and stroking, a smiling face, a laughing voice, a reassuring glance, an excited look - these intimate interactions with a loving adult caregiver can turn any situation into a learning opportunity.

Studies of nursery staff in large daycare facilities are unsettling in this regard. The interactions between these caregivers and children were found to be very brief.

Even when there were many caregivers to share the workload, there were much less eye contact with the children than there would be between a mother and child. Comfort were given fleetingly, conversations are just a few

words – ‘That’s nice’ – not the long lingering interactions that happen between a mother and child. Children’s overtures, especially the subtle ones given by a baby with its eyes and soft noises to ‘notice me’, are often completely ignored, causing the children to give up trying to connect socially.

***A baby will grow up smarter if he spends his days with a loving and attentive adult.***

## Babies need to feel safe

Because of the way their brains are being wired, babies are emotional beings. A baby will plainly not feel safe in even the most secure and well-equipped crèche if he doesn’t have a special bond with at least one of the adults in that setting.

Someone, with whom a baby has developed a safe bond, is referred to as an *attachment figure*. A child’s mother is usually his *primary attachment figure*. But he also feels safe in the company of a few *secondary attachment figures*. Fathers, grandmothers, nannies and older siblings typically fall into this category.

To develop a safe attachment with a caregiver, a baby or toddler needs to spend large amounts of one-on-one time with that particular person. He needs to see the person react positively or negatively over and over again in various situations, so that he can get to know the person’s emotional style and learn to predict the person’s reactions. Only then will he totally relax in that person’s company when his mother is not present.

It is practically impossible for baby or toddler to develop safe attachments with caregivers in an impersonal facility where 5 caregivers are collectively responsible for looking after 20 toddlers. Each of them will relate and respond to your baby in a different way and there often will be no time to attend to his needs at all.

Also, when a child is lucky enough to develop a bond with one of the caregivers, he is soon torn away from that caregiver as he is expected to ‘advance’ from class to class as he gets older. There is a class for the little ones, another set of caregivers for crawlers, another set of caregivers for when he’s walking, potty-trained, and so forth.

Children in large and impersonal daycare facilities often come across as surprisingly calm and compliant, considering that being without the company of a safe attachment figure is about as scary to under 3’s as it would be for an adult to be attacked by a spider.

However, under their calm exteriors, the majority of these children experience high levels of anxiety. They are in a constant state of ‘fight or flight’. Tests done on their saliva to determine the level of cortisol (a stress hormone) in their bodies, showed that most of them experienced heightened cortisol levels during the hours spent in daycare. And many spend all day in those circumstances.

In an article on the toxic effects of cortisol on brain cells, Robin Balbernie describes the potentially corrosive effect that prolonged high levels of this stress hormone can have on a developing brain during the first years of life. (Please Google ‘Cortisol and the early years by Robin Balbernie’ to read this article.)

***Under 3’s need a safe bond with one caregiver for duration of the first 3 years of life. No child can explore with confidence, develop to his full potential or learn to enjoy life when he anxious most of the day.***

## Your baby needs language

Under 3’s don’t play together like older children do. Instead of playing with one another, they play alongside each other. This means that the time that your child spends in the company of other toddlers doesn’t contribute much to his social, intellectual or language development.

Toddlers learn a great deal as they explore on their own and it wouldn’t be wise to constantly hover over them. But there will be times when your child will need somebody with him in the sandpit – and an adult will be far more useful.

Babies and toddlers will always explore the sensory experience first - touching the sand and moving it around. An adult or older sibling can then add *emotions* of fun and excitement.

The caregiver can also observe and wait to see what interests the child and then add meaning to the experience by using *language* to focus his attention on what he is doing.

She can also *demonstrate new actions* to introduce your child to new thoughts and concepts. She can show him how to fill a container with sand, how one container is heavier than another, how sand flows from one container into another, how the child can take turns, use a spade to dig a hole or build a sand-house for the poor homeless plastic mouse to live in. The quality of the interaction makes all the difference.

***Adults can contribute far more to a baby and toddler’s development than friends of the same age, because the adult is able to add emotions and language. Adults can also demonstrate new concepts.***

## He needs consistent discipline

A child needs to learn the rules of his world before the age of 24 months or life, or else life is likely to become very difficult for him and his family from thereon after.

A baby develops a ‘social contract’ with his primary caregiver between 8 and 24 months. During this period he closely observes her reactions to the various things that he does. If she consistently reacts negatively to certain behaviours and positively to others, he gradually learns which behaviours to avoid and which to repeat. He also learns how many times she will speak before she expects of him to react to what she has said.

Babies who receive too many mixed signals from many different people during the first 24 months struggle with discipline later on. The same goes for children whose caregivers don’t have the time or the inclination to encourage positive behaviour and discourage misdemeanors during the first 24 months.

The 3 major large-scale studies that was done on the effects of nursery care during the last 2

decades where the NICHD study done on 1000 children in America, the EPPE study done on 3000 children in England and a large-scale study carried out by Penelope Leach on 1200 children, also in England.

These studies, along with others in countries ranging from Australia to Norway, have found that:

***Older children who had spent their first 3 years in impersonal creches were found to be more difficult to discipline. They were, on average, more defiant, more aggressive and less able to control their impulses.***

## Under 3’s need security more than they need friends

There is no need to worry that your child will be lacking in social skills if he doesn’t have daily or even weekly contact with other children of the same age before his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

Under 3’s don’t need friends to develop excellent social skills; they need adults.

Large and impersonal nurseries, once hailed as the way to give our kids good social skills, have been found in recent studies to be a poor substitute for loving one-to-one care.

The secure relationships that your baby has with the important adults in his life - and maybe an older sibling or two – will be enough to teach him everything he needs to know about trusting people and getting along with them.

These early social skills will then lay a solid foundation on which he will develop real friendships with children of his own age when he is ready – probably around his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

**Note:** Although under 3’s don’t need other children to develop a foundation for future social skills, spending time with other children isn’t a bad idea in itself. Toddlers initially view other children as ‘living toys’ and they benefit from learning more about these ‘toys’. Contact with other children will give your child the opportunity to discover for himself that other kids have feelings and needs, just like adults.

In light of this, you can occasionally arrange for your child to spend time with another child, especially from about 21 months onwards. The experience is likely to be more fun if the other child is older than 3. But if the two party-goers are about the same age, keep in mind that toddlers play alongside each other, so make doubly sure that you provide interesting things to do and supply them with two of every kind of toy to minimize conflict.

Refer to your Practica Guide to learn about your child’s interests at his particular age and to get practical ideas.

Also try and give a running commentary about what each of the kids are doing. Each child will find it interesting to hear you describe his own actions and the actions of the other child, and will benefit even more.

*For more information on the impact of daycare on under 3’s you can refer to Steve Biddulph’s book “Raising Babies” ISBN-10 0-00-722192-4*