

PART ONE



Games for Infants

The brain is not developed at birth. The heart has the same form from birth on, but the brain needs experiences to make pathways between the brain cells. We have one hundred billion brain cells at birth. The ones that aren't used die. We use them when we connect them, with synapses, to each other in meaningful ways.

By age three, one thousand billion connections have been created by repeating things over and over. Repetition creates patterns as one experience is connected to many similar experiences. In order to form these patterns, children need interaction.

The relationship between parent and child is crucial to brain development. Parents and caregivers have a marked affect on creating connections, because the pathways between brain cells are reinforced by what the infant sees, smells, hears, touches, and does during the first years of life. Children raised in deprived sensory environments where there is minimal touching, sounds, sights, and experience actually develop smaller brains. Experience literally grows brains. Even rats raised in cages full of toys have more brain mass than rats with no toys.

The games in this part of the book help form patterns by giving babies a rich sensory environment to attend to. There are many games that stimulate the infant's sensory systems of touch, sight, sound, and taste as well as games

that give babies repeated experiences in mastering their motor skills. There are other games that encourage exploratory and dramatic play to help babies see connections in their daily environment.

All the games work on the principle of developing sustained attention by providing interesting age-appropriate experiences. The whole continuum of attention is stimulated, from narrow focusing, such as in the Ice Cube on a Tray activity, to global focusing, such as in the What's out There? activity.

Of course, each game also produces the important pleasurable feelings that come from just having a good time, and all the games are easy to do, requiring nothing more than what you'd find around the house.

It's easy to tell when babies are paying attention: their eyes widen; their bodies get very still. If they have enjoyed the experience before, their arms and legs will flail with excitement. When they have had enough stimulation, they will turn their heads and look away, maybe even making fussing sounds. You'll soon learn how to read your baby's cues so that you'll know when to give him both fun times and rest.

Follow My Face

There is nothing more interesting to infants than a human face. They are just programmed that way, and for a very good reason: survival. Making eye contact with an adult human on whom your survival depends increases the possibility of being noticed and cared for. Whose heart isn't tugged by the purposeful gaze of a newborn?

This is also one of the first experiences in focused attention that your newborn will have. Her instinct is to look at you. You expand that and increase her attention span by having her find your eyes again and again. The delightful part is that her attention is lovingly focused on you!

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

None

DIRECTIONS

Place your face close and directly in front of your infant's face. Babies are a bit nearsighted at first and see best at about the distance from the crook of a mother's cradling arm to her smiling face. Clever nature. Infants don't yet know how to distinguish what is foreground and what is background. Getting up close ensures that your baby can see you and that she notices you. Research has shown that babies are the most attentive when looking at a human face, so it shouldn't be hard to get her attention. Once you see that her eyes have widened and focused on you, give her praise, such as by saying, "Good, you see me!"

Now, slowly move your face so that it is at the side of her face. Softly call out her name until she moves her eyes and finds you again. Praise her some more: "You found me. Good for you!"



Next, slowly move your head to the other side and repeat the activity and the praise. Sometimes, instead of side to side, move your head closer and then farther away (near and far) or diagonally.

Continue the game until your child is tired of playing. You'll know when she is done by paying attention to her signals. If your infant is very still, it means she is attending and is interested in the game. If she turns her head away and starts to squirm, it means she's done for now.

Don't worry; she will love to play this again later, and you'll be helping her learn how to control the six muscles that control each eye and to coordinate the movements of both eyes together.

VARIATIONS

Here are some other ways to help your infant get a good eye workout and expand her ability to attend:

- ◆ Hang things above her bed that sway, such as wind chimes, scarves, and mobiles.
- ◆ Put a bird feeder outside her window.
- ◆ Reflect lights on the walls and ceiling of her darkened room.
- ◆ Place interesting designs or pictures on a nearby wall.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

A major lesson being learned, in addition to focusing, is developing eye control. Learning to control the muscles of the eyes, like any other muscle in the body, happens through practice. It is this control that will enable infants to scan their surroundings, notice different details, and thereby increase their awareness and intelligence.

Small movements of the eye also help the brain learn about space—for example, what is far, what is near, and what is on the side.

Cognitively, babies are also learning to distinguish what is the main figure and what is background.

Stick Out Your Tongue

One of the first ways I play with any infant is to stick out my tongue. It may make some parents wonder about me, but it never fails to fascinate the little one. Think about it. The tongue looks like some lively little snake coming out of your mouth.

I've done this game with infants as young as three months, and they always respond by thrusting out their own tongue in imitation, even if only the tip. Having control over the tongue's movement ensures that the infant will develop the ability to form different sounds and eventually words. Try it.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

None

DIRECTIONS

Get your child's attention by softly calling to him and smiling. Once he notices you, stick out your tongue and waggle it a little. Tell him what you are doing: "It's my tongue." Tell him about his: "You have a tongue, too. Open your mouth. Let's see it," or words to that effect.

Keep wagging and maybe even add some soft sounds to keep his attention engaged. If you want, you can even gently touch his tongue to give him some sensory feedback on what part you are talking about.

Play the game as long as he is interested. Then do it another day, and once he gets it, add the variations.

VARIATIONS

Start showing him how to move his tongue in different directions. Start with side to side. Once he's got that movement, go to up-and-down movements. If you can curl your tongue, add that to his repertoire.

I also teach older babies this variation: I push my nose in, and my tongue pops out. I push my nose to one side, and my tongue goes to that side. When I push my nose to the other side, my tongue follows. I push my nose in again, and my tongue goes back into my mouth. I find little ones will stay very attentive and enjoy trying to imitate this.

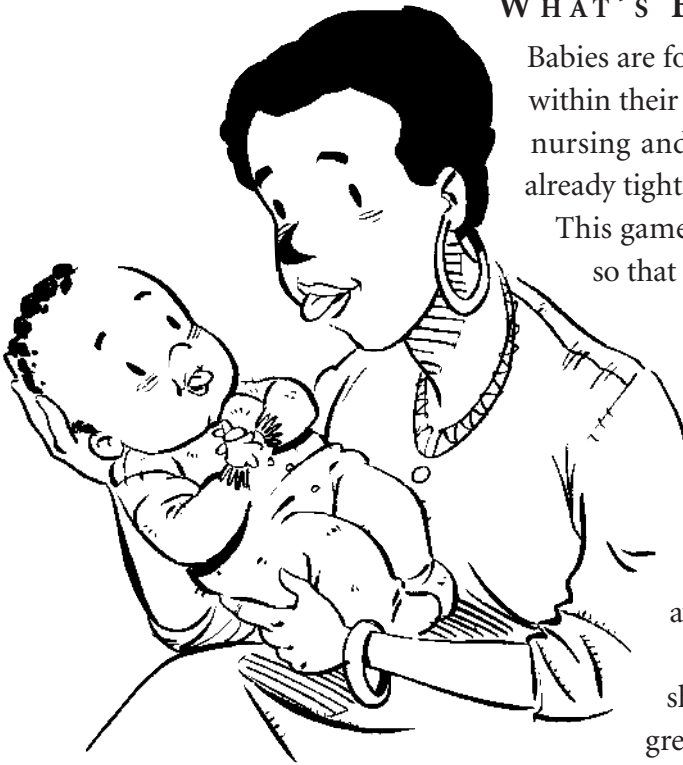
WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are focusing their attention on a task that is within their motor ability. Because they are already nursing and suckling the breast or a bottle, they already tighten the muscles of their tongue to suck.

This game makes babies aware of these muscles so that they can consciously control them.

Learning conscious control over isolated muscles is a vital skill. At first all babies flail their arms and legs about, but little by little they learn how to use one part of their body without moving any other part. They increase their internal awareness.

Playing this game with babies also shows them that you are a silly source of great fun and worth paying attention to!



The Glory of Hands

If you've been around babies before, you know there is that moment in their development, around the second to third month, when they discover their hands. They are so intrigued! They'll move them this way and that and experiment with opening and closing them and making their fingers flutter. Can you imagine how interesting that must be? Life is full!

You can help your child focus on her hands and begin this glorious discovery with something as simple as a "scrunchie." You'll also see how absorbed focusing can soothe the restlessness of a young baby.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

Several scrunchies, which are ponytail holders made from colorful pieces of material of different sizes and various textures with elastic inside

DIRECTIONS

Place one scrunchie around the knuckles of her fingers, excluding the thumb. Experiment with finding or adjusting the scrunchie so that it is a comfortable fit for your baby's hand and is not too tight or too loose.

This game will increase her delight with her hands as you keep varying their appearance with scrunchies of differing colors and patterns.

Take the scrunchie off when your baby is not interested in it. If she starts to mouth it, it means she's discovered her hands and is starting to know how to use them. It's time for the next game!

VARIATIONS

- ◆ Put a scrunchie on her foot or ankle to help her notice her feet.
- ◆ Make a wrist or ankle bracelet by cutting elastic to just fit around your baby's wrist or ankle with a little overlap. Attach a bell that is too big to be swallowed (large jingle bells are especially easy to find and stock up on at Christmas, but handicraft stores have them year-round) and sew the ends of the elastic together.
- ◆ Instead of a bell, you can make and add a pom-pom that is too big to be swallowed. To make a pom-pom, cut a strip of heavy cardboard 1½ inches wide. Wrap a brightly colored yarn around it fifty times. Slip the yarn off the cardboard and tie it tightly around the middle with a piece of yarn about 9 inches long. Leave the ends of the 9-inch piece of yarn long for tying the pom-pom on to the elastic. Give the pom-pom a haircut by trimming off the longer pieces so that the fringe is even and fluffed out.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are beginning to master their body movements. In this game, babies are not only noticing their extremities but also learning to control their wrist, hand, finger, and foot movements as they move their hands and feet around to see the scrunchie from different angles or make the bell jingle.

As babies grow, with the right experiences, their dexterity will continue to improve and be a reliable source of attention.



Sock on a Bottle

When your baby is old enough to hold his own bottle, you can enrich that experience by creating a textural and visual delight with nothing more than a sock.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

Variety of clean socks in different colors, patterns, and textures

DIRECTIONS

Place the bottom of your child's bottle into a clean sock that has a pleasing texture, color, or design. Hold the bottle in front of your baby, but wait until he focuses on the new element before giving it to him. Change to a different sock on another day to add the element of surprise and give a new experience.

VARIATION

Paint black dots or stripes on the bottle and encourage your baby to focus on the pattern for a moment by gently taking his hand in yours and touching the pattern together.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

This game strengthens tactile and visual skills. It also increases babies' awareness of the textures, patterns, and colors in their world. Their awareness will increase their interest in attending to these details as they grow.

Perfect Rattles

If you haven't switched over to digital photography or you're willing to go to a photo store and get its used film canisters, here's a quickie way to excite your child's attention: make interesting rattles that are just the right size for her hands.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

4 or more clear film canisters (or any small clear container of a similar size, such as a cleaned pill bottle)

Small household items to put in canisters—for example, pennies, beans, salt, rice (can also be colored with food coloring), cornstarch, baking soda, buttons, and paper clips

Tape (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Put enough of any of the materials you've chosen in each film canister so that when it's shaken it makes a noise. Close tightly. (You might want to tape it closed if there is a toddler sibling who might open it and put the contents in her mouth.) Have some canisters contain all one material and others hold a mix of things.

Place one rattle in your baby's hand and place your hand over hers so that the rattle is still visible. Shake the rattle and either wait until she brings her hand to eye level or gently guide her hand with yours.

You can talk about what she is seeing: "Those are pennies. They make a loud sound" or "This is salt. It makes a soft sound."

The talking isn't intended to teach but merely to introduce new words and concepts.

Later, when your baby is lying on her belly, leave some of these rattles around to reach for and explore.

VARIATIONS

- ◆ Use small travel-size shampoo bottles or small clean and empty clear pill bottles, half-filled with colored water and objects that float, such as beads and sequins.

- ◆ Fill a toothpaste box with stones, sand, acorns, or similar material and cover it with contact paper. Children love to hear the sound of the objects sliding as they tip the box up and down.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are learning that they can cause things to happen, which is an important factor in getting and holding their attention. In this case, their attention is excited because shaking the rattle will cause a sound to happen and the items inside to move.

I can't stress enough the importance of giving children many different experiences and opportunities to explore. Understimulated children can be significantly delayed in their attention skills.

In this game, children are also learning about variations in sounds: some are loud, some are soft, and all have slightly different qualities. These differences further reward children's experience in attending.

When they are lying on their belly reaching and shaking the rattles, they have the added benefit of strengthening the muscles of their neck and back. This will later help them hold their head up so that they can look around and notice more things!



First Exercises

One of the first ways to help your baby learn to focus is to increase his awareness of his body and teach him how to make his body work. Infants are born with two arms and two legs, which they haven't a clue about how to work. They wave them around with great energy, but they need experience to learn how to make them do what they want. One of the largest tasks newborns are faced with is learning how to move their bodies and to isolate muscle groups for purposeful movement.

Imagine if you were to wake up one day with three extra appendages in a world where everyone has them and everyone but you uses them expertly. It will give you a sense of what infants have to accomplish.

You can help your infant gain this experience and in the process have loving, fun moments. Officially you'll be doing "range of motion" exercises in which you are giving your child the experience of moving his arms and legs in their full motoric range.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

None

DIRECTIONS

When your child is lying on his back, place a hand on each of his arms. You can rub his arms first and talk about how beautiful they are and then sing or chant the song included here while moving his arms and then his legs in the movements described. Babies like rhythmic movements and a sure, firm touch. If a muscle feels tense, hold the limb by the elbow or knee joint and gently jiggle it to reduce tension. Repeat each section as often or as little as feels right for the moment.

I'm using the tune of "Frère Jacques" in this example. Feel free to use whatever tune you prefer or make up one of your own.

How do your arms move?

How do your arms move?

Up and down

Up and down

Feel your arms go up now

Feel your arms go down now

Up and down

Up and down



How else do your arms move?

How else do your arms move?

In and out (or open and close)

In and out

Feel your arms go in now

Feel your arms go out now

In and out

In and out

How do your legs move?

How do your legs move?

Up and down

Up and down

Feel your legs go up now

Feel your legs go down now

Up and down

Up and down

How else do your legs move?

How else do your legs move?

In and out (or open and close)

In and out

Feel your legs go in now

Feel your legs go out now

In and out

In and out

VARIATIONS

- ◆ You can do this with other body movements:

Arms bend and straighten

Arms rotate (hold the elbow joint and bring the palms up and then down)

Legs bend and straighten

Legs rotate (hold on to the knee and gently make the foot go from side to side)

Hips go side to side when legs are bent

Feet and hands go up and down and make circles

- ◆ You can also vary the speed of the movements by changing the tune. Singing to the tune of “Tea for Two,” for example, can make for a different rhythm:

Up and down and up and down

And in and out and in and out

And back and forth and back and forth

We doooooooooo to—ge—ther

- ◆ You can give your child time to experiment with movements by providing a large, safe, flat space on which he might roll around and try out different ways of moving. It’s nice for babies if some time is spent without diapers and other restricting clothes.
- ◆ Putting bells on booties or wrists (or both) rewards your newborn’s efforts with a lovely tinkle.

WHAT’S BEING LEARNED

Bringing a focused awareness to the body starts babies on the path to coordination and gracefulness.

Continued mastery over the body helps children become more willing to pay attention to what their body is doing. The body will be a source of expected satisfaction and not clumsy frustration.

Visually Amused

It can be boring to be an infant, especially if the child spends a lot of time on her back looking at nothing. No wonder babies can look “spaced out,” with vacant sleepy eyes. At this stage, the only way babies can entertain themselves is by watching things. You can begin to show your infant the joys of focusing by dangling a variety of interesting things to watch.

Because anything gets boring after a while, notice when your newborn no longer seems interested and change the objects. Listed here are some easy things to put on a hanger that will provide a visually amusing variety and will be easy for you to do.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Open

MATERIALS

Coat hanger

Things to hang from the hanger—for example, ribbons, scarves, foil tart pans, colorful yarn, strips of fabric, wind chimes, bells, Christmas ornaments, chains of paper clips, strips of aluminum foil, pieces of pretty wrapping paper, feathers, flowers, necklaces, beads, leaves, spoons, cloth strips cut with pinking shears, and so on

DIRECTIONS

Make a hanger with some fascinating things hanging from it. Make sure, of course, that everything is tied on well. Tie a piece of



string to the hanger and tie the other end over the changing table or above where your baby sleeps, sits in a baby seat, or lies on the floor. I find a cup hook works well for holding the hanger. The objects on the hanger should be close enough for your baby to see (7 to 24 inches away) but *out of reach*.

If you place the hanger near an open window or gently blowing fan, you add movement. Babies are fascinated by things that move.

VARIATIONS

- ◆ Hang dry flowers from an old umbrella frame.
- ◆ Hang a hula hoop and tie ribbons to it.
- ◆ Place a small fish bowl or aquarium so that your baby can easily see it from her bed or seat.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are beginning to distinguish foreground from background. Their first visual awareness is a blur of color and motion out of which details begin to emerge.

Babies are also learning that their world has many fascinating things in it, and a fascinated, focused infant is a happy, pleasant one.



A Light Touch

The ability to lovingly touch others starts when an infant is first lovingly touched. In those first few months when he is learning if this is a safe and friendly world, it's extremely important that he be tenderly held, cuddled, rocked, and caressed.

Touching also gives your baby feedback about his body parts. Touching ever so lightly encourages him to pay even closer attention to what is happening to his body.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

Feather or paintbrush

DIRECTIONS

Stroke your baby's different body parts with the feather or paintbrush and name the body part being touched—for example, "I'm touching your leg. Do you feel it? I'm stroking your sweet little leg. Now I'm touching your arm."

VARIATIONS

- ◆ Touch your baby in a variety of ways, such as with gentle squeezing, massaging, patting, and rubbing.
- ◆ Give him experience with different types of textures. Rub your baby's body with materials of different textures, such as silk, velvet, wool, cotton ball, corduroy, and powder puffs. Talk about the differences with your darling: "Isn't this velvet soft. It's so soft. Feel this corduroy. It's a bit rougher, isn't it?"
- ◆ Make or buy a quilt that has a variety of textures for the baby to lie on.
- ◆ Pat the soles of your baby's feet to stimulate muscles, encourage strong bones, and increase his awareness of the part he'll later need to control for walking.
- ◆ Put applesauce on your baby's clean foot so that he can lick it off and stimulate his foot muscles.
- ◆ When putting your baby to bed, pat different parts of his body and say "Good night toes," "Good night legs," and so on.
- ◆ And I guess it's not news that babies love to have their bodies kissed, especially their bellies!

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Rubbing, stroking, massaging, holding, patting, and other tactile experiences stimulate the central nervous system. Touch activates the nerves in

the muscles and joints, which causes children to be aware of what is going on in their body. This internal focusing gives babies a head start on controlling their own musculature, which leads to better coordination. When children have confidence in their coordination, they are much more willing to pay attention when playing sports, dancing, hiking, and doing other physical things.

Can You Hear What I Hear?

You can help your child learn that sound coming into one ear means that the source of the sound is coming from that side, and sound coming equally into both ears means that the source of the sound is either above, below, or in front of her. Although this may seem obvious, the reality is that, like everything else, this is something we all have to learn from experience. You can help reinforce your child's learning by playing this game.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused
(Variations are open and focused)

MATERIALS

Rattle
Music

DIRECTIONS

While your baby is lying on her back, shake a rattle on one side of her head and out of sight of her eyes. When she turns her head to find the source of the noise, praise her skill. "You found the rattle, you smart girl, you!" Keep moving the rattle around in different locations, including above and below her, while encouraging your infant to find the sound. "Where is it now? Can you find it? You did!" Change the noisemaker to keep the game interesting.

VARIATIONS

You can also help your child develop the ability to hear a wide range of sounds and acquire an ear for music by introducing a variety of pleasant sounds. Here are some ideas:

- ◆ Sing words sometimes instead of speaking them.
- ◆ Make music for your baby even if it is only off-key crooning to the rhythm of a spoon on a pan. It's nice to learn we can make our own music.
- ◆ Play her a variety of music, such as jazz, classical, swing, and rock and roll. Keep a nice balance between music and silence so that your baby can develop a sensitive ear. (Sound that is on all the time gets “tuned out,” and the child begins to use her hearing less.)
- ◆ Hang a pair of noisemaking items, such as two spoons, above where she lies down so that she can swat at them to make a sound.
- ◆ Speak in different pitches to your baby. Sometimes talk in a whisper; other times modulate between loud and soft. Sometimes hum or whistle.
- ◆ Hang wind chimes outside her window. There are a variety of kinds you can get. The ones made of bamboo are quite different from the ones made of steel pipes. The ones made from shells tinkle differently than the ones made of glass.
- ◆ Place a ticking clock near where your child naps. Perhaps it will remind her of the time she lay close to her mother's heart.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Besides learning how to tell the location of sound, babies are learning the delights of listening, especially with all the variations. Listening requires a shift in consciousness to make it an active skill, a changing of gears. As adults, we know the difference between hearing people talk and really listening to what they are saying, or hearing music in the background and really listening to it. This awareness is what is being developed and encouraged here.

A Very Merry Unbirthday

Sometime when you happen to pass a party store or a party decoration section, grab a few items. You can use them at unexpected times to delight your child's senses.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Open

MATERIALS

Party decorations, such as crepe-paper streamers, paper flower garlands, kites, and balloons

DIRECTIONS

Hang streamers and colorful balloons or whatever else appeals to you, such as kites or Mexican paper flower garlands, in the room while your baby is sleeping.

When he wakes up and after he has become adjusted to being awake, let him discover the new decorations for himself or hold him up to see them. Get the thrill of watching the delight and surprise on your baby's face when he notices the unexpected visual fiesta.

If you know the words to the unbirthday song from *Alice in Wonderland*, here's your opportunity to sing it! It starts off like this:

A very merry unbirthday to you—to you

A very merry unbirthday to me—to me

VARIATION

Place an unexpected new item in a place where your baby is sure to notice, such as above the changing table or across from his car seat.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

When babies are rewarded for looking around and seeing something unexpected and interesting, they develop the habit of scanning their environment to look for the familiar and the new. This encourages their ability to attend to details in their environment. This scanning also helps develop their control over eye muscles and increases their ability to focus their eyes to see farther distances, which extends the number of things to notice.



Pokey Pudding Hole

Infants' fingers go from chubby little things to precise instruments that can start picking lint off the floor and later type on keyboards. The first step in digit development is isolating the index finger. Babies who point have learned to do that. You can help your little one learn that first important trick in a most delicious way using the Pokey Pudding Hole.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

Small packaged pudding or yogurt cup

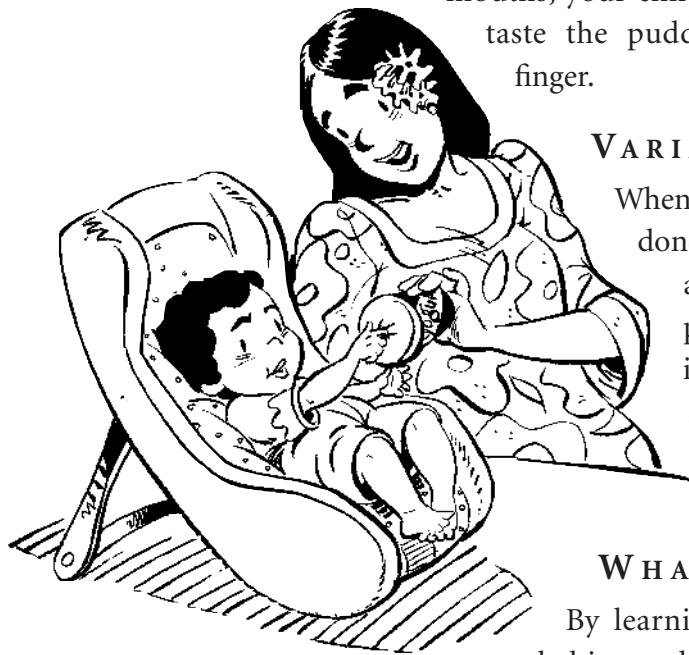
Knife

DIRECTIONS

Buy a small pudding or yogurt cup in the refrigerated section of the grocery store. Remove the plastic lid and cut the foil lining of the container so that there is a small hole just a little bit bigger than the size of the baby's index finger. Make sure the edge of the hole is smooth to the touch.

Let your baby experiment with poking her finger in the hole. Because curious babies check out everything they touch by putting it in their

mouths, your child won't need much encouragement to taste the pudding or yogurt and suck it off her finger.



VARIATIONS

When the yogurt is no longer usable and she's done with that game, wash out the container and put different things inside for her to poke and explore: cotton balls, soft cloth in different textures, and so on. (You might need to retape the foil lining.)

Any substance that isn't harmful and will stimulate her curiosity will work.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

By learning how to isolate their index finger, babies are learning the first step in controlling the muscles of their fingers. This skill begins a lifetime of concentrating on all the wonderful things that competent hands can do. If you know you can rely on your hands to do what you want, then you are more likely to concentrate on a task. Avoiding frustration is one of the reasons children move on to something else. Helping our children be dexterous is something we can do.

Dangling Toys

There comes a time for babies, usually around eight to twelve weeks of age, when looking without touching becomes boring. Now he will not only look intently at a dangling toy but also take a swipe at it. Contact may be by

chance at first, but with practice, he'll go from swiping to grabbing to pulling.

Keep your child's attention level high by providing things worth reaching for. And you're not stuck with only plastic cartoon toys. You can use whatever is in the house or buy inexpensive things that provide tactile and sound input.

TYPES OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Open and focused

MATERIALS

Bungee cord, tie, or belt

Elastic, string, or plastic shower curtain rings

Household items to hang—for example:

Stuffed sock

Bag of marbles in very secure bag

Measuring spoons

Film canisters

Empty spools of thread strung together

Plastic Easter eggs filled and taped

Aluminum pie plates facing each other and taped securely
together with noisy things, such as shells or beans, inside

Stuffed wool or cotton glove

Soft cloth in different colors

Ribbons

Sponges

Napkin rings

Heavy ply or doubled surgical gloves with different things in the
fingers, such as rice, flour, cornstarch, and beans

Small zip-type freezer bag with squishy stuff inside, such as pud-
ding or peanut butter

Stuffed nylon hose with bells inside



DIRECTIONS

Hang toys from a commercial baby arch or from a bungee cord, a tie, or a belt strung between two legs of a table. Use either elastic, string, or shower rings linked together to hang the toys. Be sure the toys are hanging low enough so that a child sitting on the floor, in an infant seat, or lying on his back can easily reach them. And be sure the main cord is high enough that your baby can't get tangled in it.

VARIATION

Hang one string longer than the rest and add a plastic bracelet or shower ring to the end of that string so that when your baby pulls it, everything rattles and shakes and makes noise at once.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are learning to scan a collection of objects and then pick one to consciously swat at or grasp. All their attention is engaged as they practice finding the exact muscles and power needed to accomplish the task.

If you put the objects on elastic, your little one is also building arm strength because the items will require more tugging.

Bat the Ball

Batting a ball can keep a baby fascinated for long periods. There's the thrill of connecting with a ball and making it move and the amazing sight of seeing it come back again.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

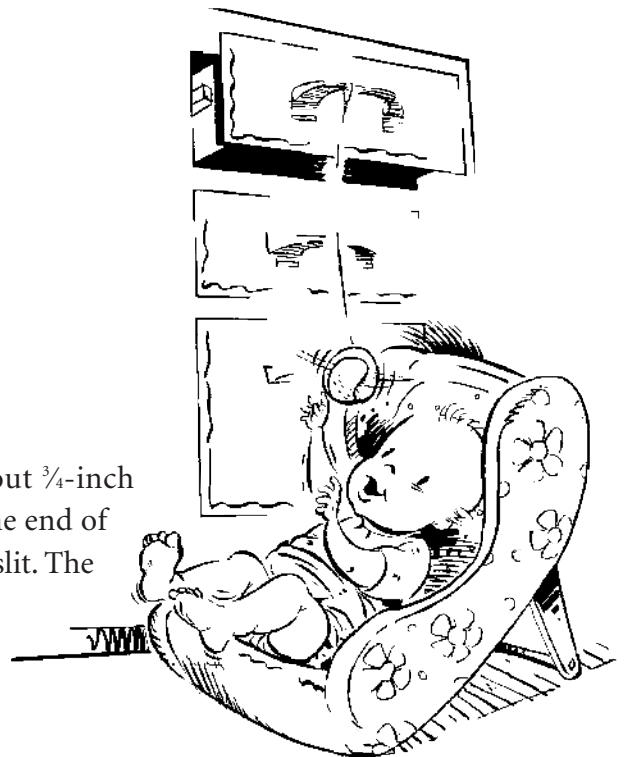
MATERIALS

Tennis ball
String
Knife

DIRECTIONS

Using a sharp knife, make a small slit (about $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch wide) in a tennis ball. Tie several knots in the end of the string and poke the knotted end into the slit. The knots will prevent the string from slipping out.

If you have a little bell available, slip that into the slit too.



Tie the other end of the string to a kitchen drawer handle. Pull the drawer out a few inches so that when your baby is sitting on the floor or in an infant seat, she can bat it back and forth like a tetherball. The ball should hang a bit above her head so that it won't swing into her face.

Make sure that if she pulls downward on the ball, the drawer won't fall and nothing will fall out. You'll want to keep an eye on your baby as she does this activity to be sure her hand doesn't tangle in the string. You might even want to have a turn batting it yourself!

VARIATION

Tie the end of the string to a tray of a high chair so that she can throw the ball and pull the string to get the ball back.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are learning eye-hand coordination and are developing their arm muscles. They are also developing binocular depth perception and increasing control over their eye muscles.

The challenge of connecting with the ball enhances babies' ability to stay focused for long periods.

High Chair Fling

Babies love to throw things, especially from the height of their high chair. This is a great way for children to learn how to open their hands. Flexing their fingers to grab is a reflex that comes with birth. Anyone who has had an infant grab his or her hair knows they are great at grasping and not so great at releasing. Babies need to learn how to release that grasp by extending the finger muscles. Throwing things is one of the ways they have fun learning it.

It's also one of the ways you may get more exercise than you might want by continually having to bend down to pick up the thrown items.

Reduce your end of the job without depriving your baby of the thrill of flinging by tying different household items to one end of a short string and the other end to the high chair.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

String or yarn

Household items to tie on—for example:

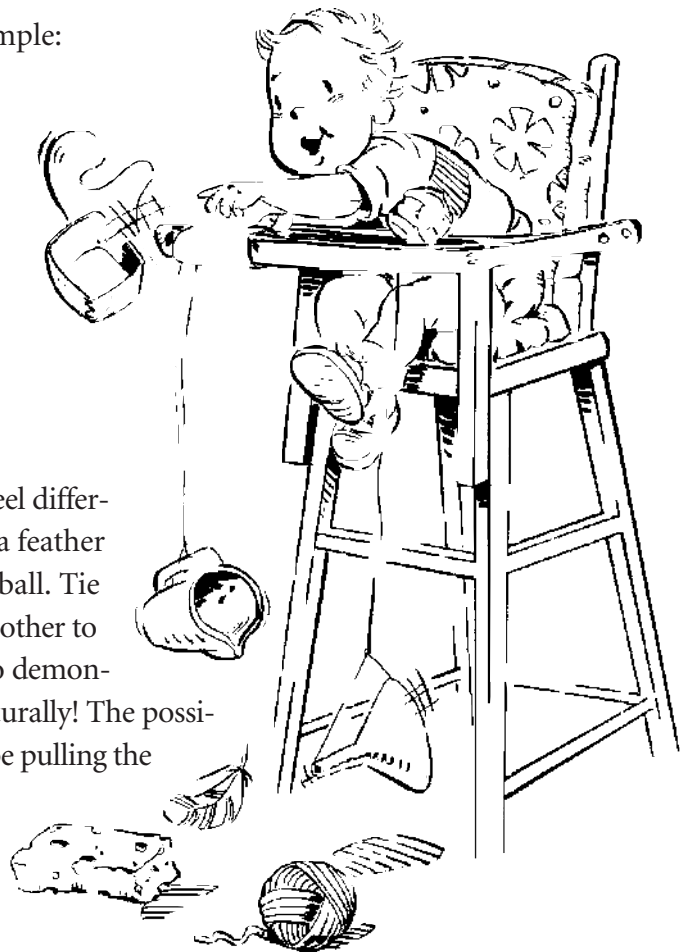
- Sponge
- Small boxes, such as jewelry boxes
- Wiffle balls
- Net bag with cotton inside
- Aluminum foil balls
- Feathers
- Stuffed animals

DIRECTIONS

Collect a few different items that will all feel different when thrown. For example, flinging a feather will feel different than flinging a Wiffle ball. Tie one end of a string to the item and tie the other to the high chair. You probably won't have to demonstrate the flinging part. Babies do that naturally! The possibly new and interesting part for him will be pulling the string and getting the toy back.

VARIATION

Instead of tying the string, you can tape the end of the string to the high chair leg or tray table with duct tape. Of course, if the tape is within reach, your baby will probably get interested in picking at the tape and loosening it. Make sure the piece is too big to swallow if he is successful.



WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are receiving feedback from their muscles that some items take more effort to throw than others, and they are learning to focus on this internal sensation. Later they will use this information in many ways, such as in judging how hard to throw a ball to hit a target or how hard to press a pencil so the point doesn't break.

Ice Cube on a Tray

Having a lot of interesting things to focus on in the short term sets a baby up with the expectation that life has many things to notice. In this game, a simple ice cube tossed on a high chair tray can provide some focused fun as it skitters to-and-fro and your baby tries to catch it.

When my children were babies, I noticed that they always got fussy just about the time I was making dinner. I think it was the smells that reminded them they were getting hungry. Give them something immediate to focus on, and make both of your lives easier!

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Focused

MATERIALS

Ice cubes
Food coloring (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Place a large ice cube on your child's tray. (For added interest, make colored ice cubes using the food coloring.) She'll probably catch it and suck on it for a while, then lose it again and chase it around some more. Keep an eye out that it hasn't melted so much that it might be small enough to swallow. Before you take the small cube away, replace it with another large one.

Your baby will also enjoy splashing the melted water.

VARIATIONS

- ◆ You could also make the ice cubes out of juice.
- ◆ If you don't mind messy, here are other interesting things to place on your baby's tray to capture her attention:
 - Soy sauce, mild mustard, or ketchup to squiggle around with her fingers
 - Whipped cream or meringue to poke and lick
 - Cornstarch on a secured mirror to see her reflection come in and out of focus
 - Jell-O blocks to touch and to watch shimmy and shake

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

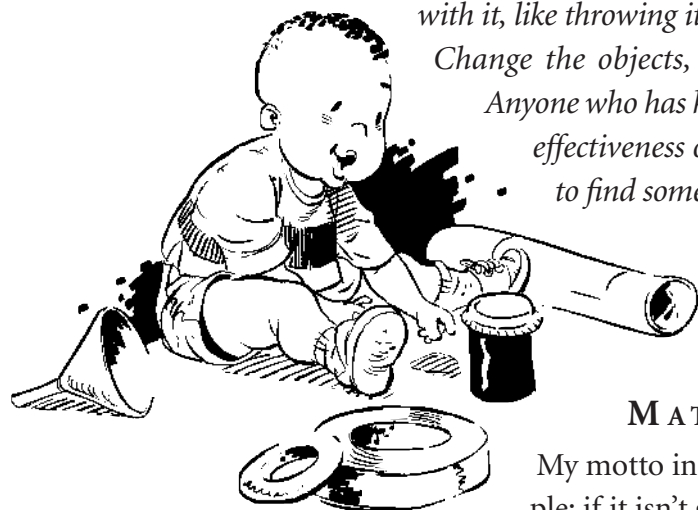
In terms of physical development, babies are practicing their eye-hand coordination. They have to keep an eye on the moving object and coordinate their hands in just the right place to catch the slippery thing. This task requires total concentration and extends their ability to pay attention.

If It Doesn't Hurt—It's a Toy

Children are very curious about all the things around them, especially if they see that these objects interest you. It's getting more common these days to find a very young child who can't even walk who already knows how to use the remote control for the television!

There are thousands of things that are acceptable for babies to explore. To encourage this innate instinct of exploration, keep out of reach the things that your baby can't explore, then just let him loose on his own to find the things that make up his world. You can also provide new things to examine.

Once they have looked at an object from every angle and discovered how it smells and tastes, babies are usually bored with it and try new ways of dealing



with it, like throwing it out the window and watching it bounce. Change the objects, and you'll renew your baby's interest. Anyone who has had to distract a fussy child knows well the effectiveness of searching in a purse, pocket, or drawer to find something new for your baby to examine.

TYPES OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Open and focused

MATERIALS

My motto in selecting the right kind of item is simple: if it isn't going to hurt, it's a toy. That means the object has to have no sharp edges; it must be too large to swallow; it cannot be harmful if put in the mouth; and it must have nothing that can pinch or harm in any way.

A few interesting toys you can find around the house that you may not have thought of are listed here:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Tea infuser | Melon ball maker |
| Funnel | Plastic cookie cutter |
| Small strainer | Bottle stopper |
| Roll of masking tape | Nail brush |
| Pieces of junk mail | Napkin rings |
| Rubber glove | Bendable straws |
| Pastry brush | Measuring cups |
| Whistle | Measuring spoons |
| Empty plastic squeeze bottles | Flashlights |
| Sturdy plastic bracelets | Pleated hand fan |
| Tape | Rolls of cloth |
| Empty water bottles | Cassette tape box |
| Bandage box with flip-up lid | Desk organizer |
| Film canisters | Mailing tubes |
| Old deck of cards | Cardboard juice cans and lids |
| Empty plastic cosmetic jars and travel-size bottles | |

DIRECTIONS

Gather a few items and keep them in a small box, such as a tackle box or shoe box. Let your child rifle through them. Change them according to your child's interest level. Keep an eye out for intriguing stuff at garage sales and secondhand stores.

VARIATIONS

Almost endless!

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Exposure to many items will encourage children's innate curiosity, a quality that will serve them well in school and in life. Sometimes curiosity is stifled at an early age by parents who overprotect their child by not permitting him to satisfy his natural instinct to explore.

Besides focusing in on the details of the different items, children are developing an open awareness of several different things at once. They are making new connections and seeing patterns: "Hmmm, all these things have empty insides, and you can put stuff into them. And if you turn them over, things fall out! But with this one, it only comes out if you turn it a certain way . . . hmmm."

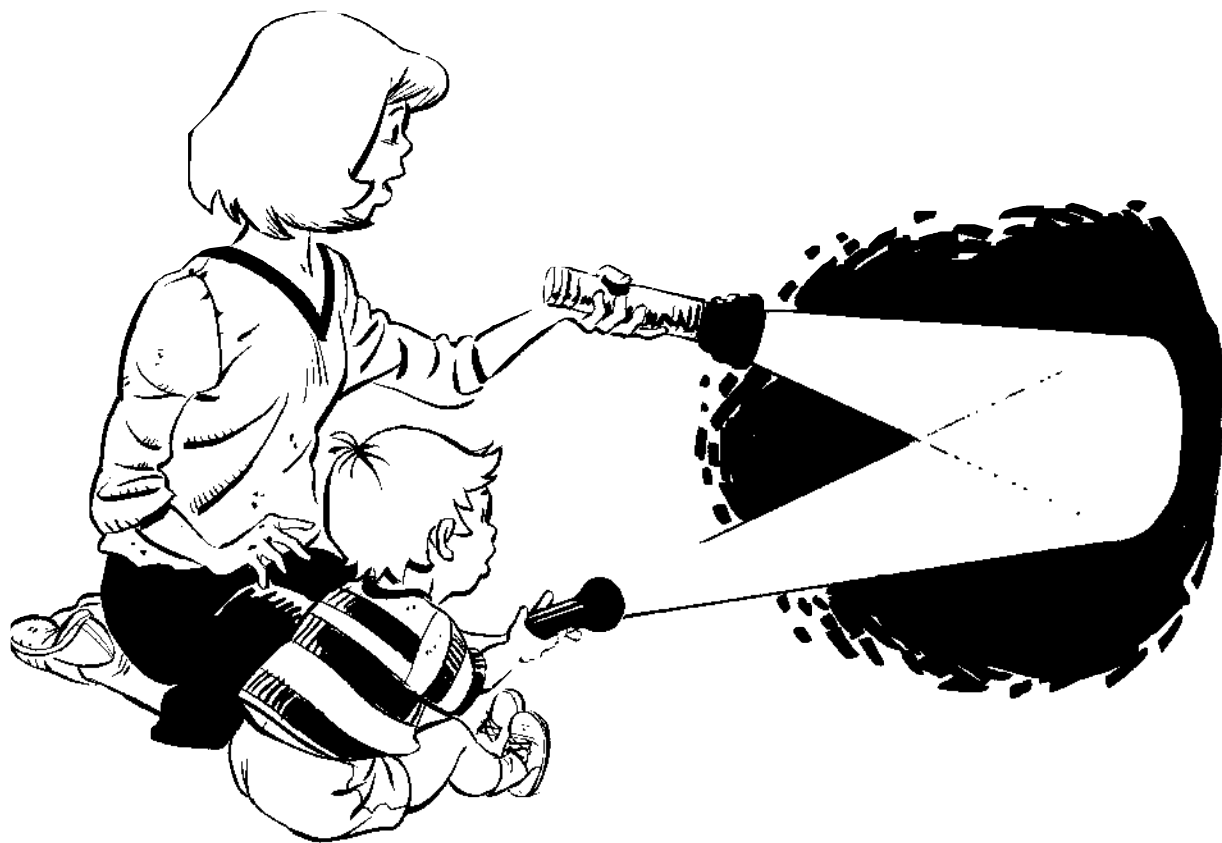
This kind of experimentation encourages children to pay attention for longer periods because interesting differences and similarities appear.

A Spotlight in the Dark

Babies are fascinated with anything new. It's fun for us to be with a little one when she discovers something for the first time. In this game it's the delight of a flashlight in the dark.

TYPES OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Open and focused



MATERIALS

One or two flashlights

DIRECTIONS

Keep the lights off in the room you are in and scan the room with a flashlight, spotlighting different familiar things. “Look—there’s the television. Here is the table, and there is your high chair.”

VARIATIONS

You know your little one is going to want a chance to hold the flashlight. Let her. She can shine it wherever she wants, or ask her to find, by pointing with her flashlight, an object you name.

As she gets older and more coordinated, continue this game, but now you both have flashlights; encourage her to “catch” your spotlight by covering your spotlight with hers. Then it’s your turn to chase next.

WHAT’S BEING LEARNED

Spotlighting singles out individual objects on which to focus; scanning the room to find different objects promotes open awareness.

This game also reinforces the knowledge that things that can’t be seen still exist. Even though one can’t see the chair in the dark, for example, it is still there. Watch where you walk!

Following the light with their eyes also helps babies’ developing visual system.



What’s out There?

On the Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood television program, he had a segment called “These are the people in your neighborhood,” because he knew that children are curious about what is around them.

Even infants are curious about what’s around them, and often a fussy baby will quiet down when taken to see What’s out There.

Stimulate your baby’s interest in his environment from the very start by taking a tour of his world, both inside and out.

TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

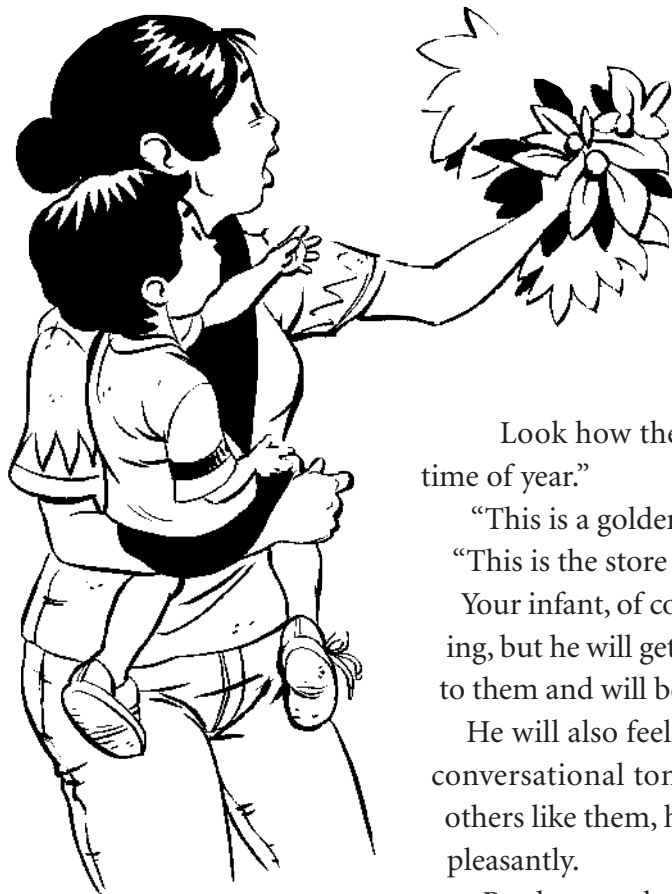
Open

MATERIALS

None

DIRECTIONS

Hold your baby so that he has a good view of the world by looking over your shoulder or facing forward. Take a tour of your home, yard, and



neighborhood. Walk up close to various things so that your baby has a near view and talk about what you are looking at.

“This is a photo of your grandfather. We took it on a fishing trip up North. He was so proud of that fish!”

“This is where we keep food so it stays cold.”

“This is the biggest tree in our yard.

Look how the green leaves are turning red. I love this time of year.”

“This is a golden daffodil. I feel happy just looking at it.”

“This is the store where we buy our groceries.”

Your infant, of course, won’t understand a word you’re saying, but he will get the sense that things have words attached to them and will be fascinated with all that is out there.

He will also feel the pleasure in your voice and enjoy the conversational tone. Later, because of this experience and others like them, he will develop his own ability to converse pleasantly.

Be alert to when your baby starts to look away or fusses; he’s letting you know he has had enough stimulation for the moment and needs quiet. Do it again another day.

VARIATIONS

This is a game whose variations continue throughout your baby’s childhood. You can keep showing your child new things until the time comes when he starts showing *you* what’s new!

WHAT’S BEING LEARNED

- ◆ Babies are developing their eyesight and visual acuity.
- ◆ They are increasing their ability to focus on things that are close and things that are distant.

- ◆ They are developing their perceptual knowledge of the many things there are to see, feel, and smell.
- ◆ They are developing their color vision, which comes in when they are around two to three months of age.
- ◆ They are being introduced to the idea that there are many things in their neighborhood and that these things have names.
- ◆ They are feeling that the world is a safe place to be because they are experiencing it from the loving safety of their parent's or loved one's arms.
- ◆ They are increasing their ability to pay attention by realizing that there are many things worth attending to in their life.

All this, thanks to you.

Where'd It Go?

Babies love hide-and-seek games. You've probably already had the fun of playing peek-a-boo with your child and watching her delight when your face reappears. Peek-a-boo is the first hide-and-seek game. In this game of Where'd It Go? you increase the challenge as your baby gets more adept.

TYPES OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED

Open and focused

MATERIALS

Scarf

Box

Bag

Toy or other small object for hiding

DIRECTIONS

There is a progression to the challenge of finding hidden objects. Start with the easiest and over time progress to the most difficult.

1. Hide something from your baby under a scarf while she is watching and ask her “Where did the _____ go?”
2. Hide something behind an object, such as a box, when your baby is not watching. Leave a bit of the object showing and ask her to find it.
3. Hide the object behind the box with nothing showing and ask her to look for it.
4. Hide something inside a paper bag that’s in her immediate vicinity.
5. Hide something behind the box *and* under a scarf before you make your request.
6. Hide something behind the box *and* under the scarf *and* inside the paper bag

VARIATIONS

- ◆ Get a yogurt container and a Popsicle stick. Draw a face on one end of the stick or paste on a face. Make a hole in the bottom of the yogurt container and push the stick through it. In front of your child, push the stick up and down so that the face appears over the rim of the container and then disappears. “Where’d it go?” “There it is!” (This is an activity you do. Be cautious about letting your baby have the stick.)
- ◆ Paste a small picture in an empty matchbox, small jewelry box, metal bandage box, or any box with a flip-up lid. Show an older baby (around one year old) how to open it to make the picture appear and close it to make it disappear.
- ◆ Get a mailing tube or the tube from a paper towel roll. Place a small car on one end and tilt the tube so that the car reappears on the other end. Let your baby experiment with putting the car in the tube and tilting it.

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

Babies are learning that things they can't see still exist. It is this sense of "object permanence" that helps babies not cry when their mother is out of sight. Babies come to learn that even though their parent is gone, she still exists and they are still safe.

Babies also have to scan their environment for the missing item and then zero in on where it is, which reinforces both open and focused attention.

