

PARENTING

There are lots of ways to help your baby's development – but some methods are more effective than others

MASSAGE OR MOZART?



WATCHING YOUR baby change from a squinting, Yoda-like newborn to a laughing, babbling, mobile baby-Buddha is one of the greatest joys of the first year of parenting. As he or she passes each developmental milestone (*see fact box*), it feels like all your hard work is paying off. But despite the fact healthy babies will develop their mental and physical skills naturally, many parents worry about how best to help the process along.

Some start giving a helping hand even before the birth. Research published in the US has shown that during pregnancy, taking a food supplement that includes long-chain fatty acids such as AA, DHA and EPA (found in omega-3 and omega-6 fish oils), can improve your baby's cognitive function. Young babies can't convert or store these substances, vital to brain and eye function, very efficiently, which is one reason the World Health Organisation recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and says that non-breastfed babies should be given an infant formula that contains AA and DHA.

After birth, baby yoga can improve physical development. Forget images of newborns sitting in the full lotus position: classes actually focus on babies and their mothers, with moves to tone and strengthen your postpartum body, plus stretches and swings to give babies an awareness of their body. Yogic babes are thought to sleep better and have a headstart getting mobile, which is perhaps why baby yoga gets the seal of approval from many health advisors.

According to Françoise Freedman of Birthlight (www.birthlight.com), which promotes holistic parenting techniques from breastfeeding to yoga, baby yoga challenges the sedentary nature of the 21st-century baby's life, getting them moving after a day spent strapped in a car seat or a buggy.

Back with the brain, ever since researchers found listening to the music of Mozart increased IQ, parents have turned up the classics to create brighter babies. The Mozart Effect CDs use Mozart's music to "awaken and stimulate the brain". However, not all experts credit the link between music and intelligence. The original research found the IQ-increase was short-lived and other studies say that, though babies recognise music they heard in the womb, serenading your baby won't boost brain power.

Then there's the fashion for cranial osteopathy, which encourages the release of stress and tensions in the body, and teaching babies sign-language. This furthers babies' existing ability to communicate with their bodies – waving and pointing for instance – in the belief that babies who can communicate are more contented and more clever. Classes such as TinyTalk (www.tinytalk.co.uk) and Sing and Sign (www.singandsign.com) do a roaring trade, but the British speech therapy community remains divided. Some say signing helps children become "active, independent communicators"; others believe it is unnecessary for babies with normal hearing and worry that it may even delay speech.

Finally, there's the ever-popular baby massage. In Asian societies, massaging oil into a baby's skin is a centuries-old tradition, now rediscovered in the West. The International Association of Infant Massage (www.iaim.org.uk) says massage helps with bonding, sleep, digestion and teething, while special-care units use gentle massage on premature babies, as it seems to lower stress levels and increase weight gain. And many parents find it a relaxing ritual that, at the very least, helps them bond with their child.

In the end, though, babies will grow up all by themselves – with or without daily doses of massage and Mozart. So perhaps the best thing you can do as a parent is to sit back and enjoy the ride.

For more information and links to dozens of other useful websites, visit www.milupa-aptamil.co.uk



PARENTS' FORUM

DOES CRANIAL OSTEOPATHY WORK?

YES: Nicola Burgess, from Rochester
 "Cranial osteopathy was a good therapy for us. Olivia was born by caesarean and – unusually for a caesarean baby – had an odd-shaped, fairly large head. Her sleep was restless and at four months she woke crying and couldn't turn her head. I took her to a cranial osteopath who gently felt the top of her skull and base of her neck and said the flow of fluid was off-line. After six weeks, her restlessness ended, she fed better and was far happier in herself."

NO: Sarah Ockwell-Smith, from Stansted
 "We used cranial osteopathy successfully for glue ear with my second son, Flynn, but when we tried it for his younger brother, Rafferty, who had colic and general tummy problems, it had no lasting effect. After four weeks I gave up. I decided to try homeopathy and was stunned when 30 seconds after giving the remedy our screaming baby turned into a happy, smiling boy."

FACT BOX

A baby will develop fast in the first 12 months. At birth, it has little motor control, and can only focus on objects about 12-16ins away, but by two weeks old it can recognise its mother's face. After that, the major milestones are: four to six weeks, first smiles; three months, raises head while lying on front; four months, coos and chuckles; three to five months, reaches toward objects; three to six months, rolls over, laughs and holds objects, using mouth to explore them; six months, babbles; six to nine months, sits unsupported; around eight months, crawls; around nine months, pulls to standing; by 12 months, stands without support.

NEXT WEEK: There's more to giving your baby the best than simply flexing your credit card