

What Are They Learning?

Most people watch with anticipation as each unique baby learns to hold up her head, roll over, sit up, reach, grasp, crawl and walk. We wait with excitement to hear her babble, giggle, smile, and finally say a word or two.

However, once babies begin walking and talking, I notice that many people start to think about learning in terms of ABC's, 123's, colors and shapes. I think this happens because the first formal learning most of us remember is what we learned in kindergarten or four year old preschool. And school-readiness skills are spoken of frequently by both the popular media and marketing companies.

Maria Montessori's sensitive period for language development certainly suggests that babies and toddlers are very engaged in language learning. However, they are not ready to explore how a letter is a symbol for a sound. They are discovering that a spoken word is a symbol for an object or action. They are looking at the world around them and wondering, "Wat dis?" or "Dat?" . We can help them learn language by talking with them and using all of our words. When we give children direction, it is important to use short statements that are easy to decode. But when we are in conversation we want to immerse them in the complexity of the language or languages they are learning.

Toddlers perceive the world and engage with it differently than we do because their brains are still developing. Alison Gopnik suggests that their brains are designed differently than ours in order to maximize learning. Her TED talk is worth a look:

http://www.ted.com/talks/alison_gopnik_what_do_babies_think.html

Toddlers are also learning how to self-regulate. They have very limited capacity to manage their emotions and their impulses. They also have difficulty with flexibility. This means the same toddler that is distracted by the speck of dust near his sneakers and the music playing in the other room is also unable to let go of his desire to put spoons in the dishwasher. Our willingness to support them by soothing, distracting, and being more patient than we ever knew would be necessary, will help them develop skills to do it for themselves.

In fact, current research suggests that the best indicator for future school success is developing strong executive function skills. This means that the time we spend helping toddlers learn to manage the activities of daily life benefits their future math and reading skills more than learning to name colors, shapes, letters and numbers.

If you are interested in learning more about the importance of executive function skills, we recommend Ellen Galinsky's book *Mind in the Making*.

Infants and toddlers learn best through spontaneous exploration. We can support them by providing them with safe spaces to explore interesting materials. We recommend open ended materials like blocks and simple scarfs, materials that allow the child to explore cause and effect, or allow them to develop their fine and/or gross motor skills.

The book I recommend that explores the importance of play follows:

Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn-- And Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less [Hardcover]

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