

BRINGING UP BABY

TIPS AND STRATEGIES TO KEEP PACE WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS.



DID YOU KNOW?

The average child's brain doubles in size in the first year and reaches about

80%

of its adult volume by age 3, and 90% by age 5. Although it stops growing in size by early adolescence, the brain continues fine-tuning itself and fully matures around age 25.

Attachments and relationships formed with caregivers — including parents and educators — during these early years have a far-reaching influence on children's development. For infants and toddlers to thrive and learn, caregivers must provide a nurturing environment tailored to their individual needs, says Ms Phua. "It is about understanding and appreciating that their developmental journey unfolds at a pace unique to them. Rushing them to achieve quick results beyond what they are capable of diminishes curiosity and motivation to learn, and creates stress," she adds.

Beanstalk speaks to Ms Phua, parents and educators about the strategies, challenges and issues related to supporting children from birth to age three.

WHAT MATTERS MOST DURING THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF LIFE?

Sherlyn Ho: Foremost is the relationship adults build with children. Children feel valued and appreciated when we are present in our interactions with them. Each conversation and exchange presents opportunities for adults to support young children's holistic development and well-being.

Annie Tan: Provide a safe space for infants and toddlers to play, exposure to a language-rich environment, as well as responsive caregiving and secure attachments. It is about laying the groundwork for their learning and development during this three-year window of opportunity.

Karyn Phua: To create a supportive environment for young learners, we need to allow them the freedom to move and explore. Setting up safe and stimulating spaces with age-appropriate toys, textures and colours can enrich children's sensory experiences and foster their natural curiosity. This encourages infants and toddlers to explore and discover, so that they develop problem-solving skills.

Over one million neural connections are formed in the brain every second in the first three years of a child's life. This means early experiences, interactions and environments affect the way a baby's brain develops and learns. These can significantly shape all aspects of development including language development, cognition, motor skills and emotional regulation during this sensitive period, says Ms Karyn Phua, a lecturer at the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (Temasek Polytechnic Campus).

“Children feel valued and appreciated when we are present in our interactions with them.”

MS SHERLYN HO, 33
Vice-Principal (In-Training),
St. James' Church
Kindergarten (Gilstead)



WHAT ARE SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS WHEN PLANNING ACTIVITIES AND CHOOSING MATERIALS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS?

Annie: Select safe and appropriate materials and activities that align with children's interests and developmental stages. This will enable them to learn at their own pace. Engage children in activities that encourage back-and-forth interaction, such as simple games like peek-a-boo, and action songs that invite mimicry and participation. Provide choices in play and respect their decisions and preferences, as this helps build autonomy and confidence. Also, choose materials that reflect diverse cultures.

At our centre, we implement a plan-do-review cycle to ensure that activities are thoughtfully planned, executed with intention, and evaluated for effectiveness.

Sherlyn: Infants and toddlers learn through hands-on and concrete experiences. When planning activities, I provide opportunities for children to explore their environment or materials. As this age group needs sensory stimulation to process the world around them, I choose tangible objects and materials with varied textures.

It is also important to observe how children respond to what I have planned for them, and make changes where needed. For instance, I wanted to show the children in my class how their movements affected their shadows. However, they all decided to move to a shaded area. So, I modified the activity and asked them to think about why they couldn't see their own shadows in the shade.

“As every child is unique in their temperament and needs, we had to observe James closely and guide our responses accordingly.”

DR BENJAMIN LUI, 31
Doctor, father of James Lui, 6 months



PRESCHOOL VS HOME

Which environment exerts a more important influence on infants and toddlers? It is not an 'either-or' situation, but the stability and quality of caregiving that makes all the difference, says lecturer Ms Karyn Phua. Positive, nurturing and responsive interactions that build an emotional connection with the child contribute significantly to their healthy development.

Karyn: A well-structured curriculum should be sensory-oriented. Create experiences that trigger the sense of sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch, while being flexible enough to meet children's diverse preferences. Educators need to modify activities or deliver differentiated instruction to accommodate each child's learning pace and developmental level. A positive attitude towards learning is created when the environment promotes exploration while respecting individual autonomy.

PARENTS, WHICH STAGE OF YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT TO DATE DID YOU FIND MOST CHALLENGING?

Ng Ru Yin: When Raphael turned two and was learning to speak, he struggled to communicate with limited vocabulary. He would say "no" to everything or throw tantrums as a result of not being understood. In recent months, Raphael — now three — has been wanting to do things on his own, such as putting on his clothes, even though he sometimes can't get it right. I have to be patient as Raphael explores his feelings and tests his boundaries.

Benjamin Lui: James just turned six months old. The toughest stage so far would have to be when he was two to three months old, when my wife and I were still figuring out his non-verbal cues. As every child is unique in their temperament and needs, we had to observe James closely and guide our responses accordingly.

EDUCATORS, ANY TIPS ON HOW TO STRENGTHEN ADULT-CHILD BONDS DURING THIS EARLY STAGE?

Annie: Notice a child's cues and respond promptly. For example, when playing with an infant, adults can imitate the child's sounds and actions. By acknowledging children's communication efforts with attention and interest, adults signal to children they are understood and valued, which

then builds trust. Establish routines and rituals such as reading bedtime stories or having breakfast together. Predictability fosters a sense of stability and safety, which are crucial for strong emotional bonds. Above all, enjoy activities together; shared happiness is a powerful connector.

Sherlyn: Speak to children at their eye level. This creates safe and respectful two-way communication, which nurtures relationships. Also, show empathy when children cry. It matters to them when adults put in the effort to listen and understand them.

Karyn: Offering undivided attention during routine activities is crucial, as divided attention can lead to confusion and feelings of isolation in children. Caregivers need to be sensitive and respectful of the child's signals and cues, finding a balance between interactive activities and calming moments to avoid overstimulation. Slowing down to match the child's pace is also key, as hurrying them to learn or achieve developmental milestones can have a negative impact on the bond with the child.



HAND IN HAND

Mrs Elsie Tan-Chua, ECDA Fellow and Centre Leader at Living Sanctuary Preschool, offers tips on how educators can cultivate effective home-preschool partnerships.



A strong home-preschool partnership is one where educators and parents work together to cultivate a shared understanding of the child. As a result, appropriate provisions can be made to support the child's learning and developmental milestones.

While parents bear the main responsibility of shaping and influencing their children's development, a collaborative approach with their children's educators deepens the impact on children's learning, growth and well-being. For example, when a toddler is going through toilet training, parents and educators can discuss the appropriate strategies and methods to use, update each other about the child's progress, and fine-tune their approach where necessary.

To strengthen the partnership, educators must:

- **DEVELOP GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS.** Use accurate, appropriate and respectful language, in written or verbal form, with parents. Get to know parents well and understand their expectations. Doing so will help educators know what to focus on when giving feedback or updates.
- **DEMONSTRATE ENTHUSIASM AND EXCITEMENT** when communicating with parents, be it face-to-face, over the phone or in writing. This motivates parents to do their part in supporting children's learning. Weekly reports or updates give them ideas on what they can do with their children at home and encourage parents to share their experiences.
- **FRAME FEEDBACK IN A CONSTRUCTIVE AND POSITIVE WAY** rather than giving negative remarks or reports.
- **EARN PARENTS' TRUST.** Parents may express extra demands or question their children's well-being. This is natural as they have their children's interests at heart. Explain in a respectful manner why things are done a certain way. Suggest alternatives and work out a mutual solution to address any issues. Reassure parents and reiterate your intention of providing good, safe care and enjoyable learning experiences for their children.



“I have to be patient as Raphael explores his feelings and tests his boundaries.”

MS NG RU YIN, 33
Homemaker, mother of Raphael Kuah, 3

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU NURTURE YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT?

Ru Yin: I observed that Raphael enjoys music, so we play songs, sing and dance together at home. He's very good at physical activities too, so we let him cycle outdoors. My top priority is to support my children and build their self-esteem. I believe this will enable them to navigate life's challenges with confidence and resilience.

Benjamin: We have conversations with James. When we bring him to places such as the beach or fish farm, we describe what we see and hear to develop his language. At home, we introduce different languages through nursery rhymes and speaking to him in English and Mandarin. We try to improve his dexterity by encouraging him to grab dangling objects or play with shape-sorting toys that strengthen his fine muscles and cognitive skills. To meet James' social-emotional needs, we ensure he has a safe space to explore his surroundings and interact with other children so that he grows his confidence to build relationships with others.

EDUCATORS, HOW DO WE SET LIMITS AND GUIDE BEHAVIOURS IN INFANTS AND TODDLERS?

Annie: Be consistent and patient. If a toddler has a habit of biting others, respond firmly by saying, "We don't bite; biting hurts", then redirect him to a different activity. Patience is key as children need time to learn appropriate behaviours. Give clear, one-step directions that are easy to follow (e.g., "Please put the ball in the box"), accompanied by gestural cues. When a child follows instructions or plays nicely, give positive reinforcement by praising the specific behaviour (e.g., "Thank you for putting the toys back. You did a great job cleaning up!").

Adults can guide infants and toddlers by modelling positive behaviours and narrating the action (e.g., "I'm putting the toy away so that you can play again next time"). This encourages children to mimic prosocial behaviour.



MDM ANNIE TAN, 57
Early Years Educator, My First Skool at 6 New Punggol Road

“Adults can guide infants and toddlers by modelling positive behaviours and narrating the action.”

Sherlyn: When a child throws a tantrum at the playground, first seek to understand the situation: did we give him ample time to prepare to leave the area? Next, address and validate the child's feelings. Tell him, "I know you are feeling angry because we have to leave the playground." Children can only learn the language of emotions and develop self-awareness when we verbalise the emotions. Then, lay out options and empower the child to choose for himself (e.g., "We can come back to the playground. Would you like to come back in the afternoon or tomorrow?"). Model what the child can do or say to express his needs (e.g., "If you would like to have more time, you can say, 'More time, please.'"). Affirm the child when he displays the appropriate behaviour during subsequent situations. Throughout the process, be consistent, patient and calm.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS AND PARENTS WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT INFANT AND TODDLER DEVELOPMENT?

Karyn: Supporting infant and toddler development is a collaborative effort between educators and parents. It requires trust. This involves respecting and valuing each party's role in the child's life. Besides establishing open and regular communication to share insights about the child's experiences, engaging in joint activities such as reading programmes can equip parents with skills to support their children and strengthen parent-educator relationships.

Sherlyn: I realise parents have their own needs. Sometimes the challenges they face are influenced by their home situations. I take time to listen to their challenges, understand their needs, and create shared goals that help me plan to meet the needs of both the parents and our preschool. Beyond the usual sharing of documentation and parent-teacher conferences, we invite parents to come to class once a week to read to the children. When children carry out inquiry projects, parents are encouraged to get involved as "experts" and conduct sessions at our centre to enrich discussions and further exploration.

HEART WORK

DR PETER MANGIONE SHARES INSIGHTS ON HOW SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN INFANT AND TODDLER DEVELOPMENT.



COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Avoid these tendencies when caring for infants and toddlers.

- Seeing things only from an adult's perspective.** A child's desire to understand the world is sometimes misinterpreted as behaviour that needs correction. For example, an infant who persistently drops something on the floor is not doing so to bother the adult, but rather is likely exploring the effect of gravity.
- Overestimating children's ability to self-regulate.** Emotion regulation develops gradually during the birth-to-three period. For the first 15 months or so, infants are not ready to follow social rules. They need warm, gentle guidance from adults. As they grow into toddlerhood, they can learn simple social rules and follow well-defined social boundaries, provided adults continue to provide responsive and consistent guidance.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is about developing a sense of self and connection with others. The SEL competencies gained in a child's first three years are essential for learning in the other developmental domains — language, physical and cognitive — and provide the foundation for self-initiated exploration and learning.

Infants and toddlers who develop strong SEL skills are:

- Self-confident
- Friendly with peers
- Cooperative with adults and other children
- Empathic and prosocial
- Aware of frustrations, anger and joy, and able to communicate these emotions effectively
- Attentive and responsive to others

Research indicates that children who develop these characteristics early are more likely to succeed in future relationships, school and life.

NURTURING SEL COMPETENCIES

The attachment between child and caregiver is important for early SEL. An infant or toddler who has an emotionally secure relationship with an adult will trust that adult to provide guidance in social situations. Driven to make sense of the world, yet feeling vulnerable, the child looks to that adult for reassurance and to learn how to interact effectively with others.

To form secure attachments and promote SEL competencies in little ones, adults need to be attentive to children's cues and be mindful of the messages they themselves are sending. On one hand, being responsive to a child's interests and needs helps the child develop competence and manage feelings of vulnerability. On the other hand, adults need to be aware of how they respond or behave around children. Modelling prosocial behaviours has a much greater influence on children compared to direct teaching.

Here are some things children learn from their interactions with adults:

- > I am listened to or not.
- > What I choose to do is valued or it is not.
- > How I express my emotions is accepted or it is not.
- > I am allowed to explore or I am not.
- > My needs are mostly met or they are not.

It is important to convey messages of warmth, understanding and support to infants and toddlers. They then learn from adults how to show interest in others, take the perspective of others, and express empathy.



DR PETER MANGIONE
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Dr Mangione leads the development of comprehensive training resources for the early childhood (EC) workforce, particularly infant and toddler care providers. A co-founder of the Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC), his contributions played a major role in making it an internationally recognised model for the professional development of EC practitioners.