

Support Learning by Following Your Child's Lead

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Engagement Cues

A baby tells you when they're ready to learn by using engagement cues. First, look for relaxation and rhythm – if their body is relaxed, their eyes are open and looking around and any movements or sounds that they are making are calm and relaxed, they are open to learning. If they are looking towards you or reaching towards you, they are inviting you to connect with them, and asking for input.

On the other hand, if their eyes are closed or glazing over, they're turning away, their body is tense, or making jerky movements, those are disengagement cues. Those are signs that they need a break to process all the information they have taken in. If you respect that and give them a moment to settle, they'll return to engagement, ready to learn. If you keep adding stimuli onto a disengaged baby, that leads to overstimulation, which can lead to crying.

Follow Their Attention

Notice what your child is noticing. If they react to a sound, talk about it "oh, did you hear the dog bark? I did too. Woof!" If they look toward something, look at it with them and talk about it. If they reach toward it, bring it closer for them to see.

When something captures your child's attention, it's as if a file cabinet has opened up in their brain, and they are ready to learn all there is to know about that thing in the moment. Helping them explore it with all their senses and talking about it helps them build connections in their brain to learn and remember.

If instead, you're talking about other things, or trying to pull their interest to some idea that you think is important, they may just ignore you, or disengage, or at best, you cross signals and they try to figure out how your words are related to the thing they're looking at.

Responsive Language

Research shows that the children learn thousands of words by age 5. If the parent has practiced responsive language (following the child's attention and talking about what the child is interested in), their children reach language milestones sooner, such as imitating their parent's words, saying their first words, speaking 50 words, combining words to make a "sentence" and talking about the past. They hit some milestones months earlier than children of non-responsive parents. They process language faster and learn words more quickly, which will help them to learn in school.

The Hanen Centre offers the OWL approach to responsive language: **Observe Wait Listen**. Observe your child to see what they are interested in – wait till they turn to you for input – listen to what sounds they’re making (or gestures). You can imitate their sounds or gestures, and comment on what they are doing or noticing.

One of the easiest approaches is to narrate. When you talk about what they are doing, you give them verbs and adverbs that tie directly into their body’s experience of the moment: “You are waving your arm. Look how fast your feet are kicking.” When you talk about the objects they are interacting with, you give them nouns and adjectives that help them to file that information away with all the things it is connected to. “That’s a ball. It’s round, and blue. We hear a drum – it’s loud. You’re eating a banana – it’s sweet and squishy.”

Child Directed Play

Sometimes parents feel like their job is to keep giving their child new things to look at and new things to do. And yes, novelty (new experiences) benefits brain development. But so does repetition (the chance to do something again and again till you master it or look at something again and again till you know everything about it) and downtime to process all that you have taken in and integrate it with previous learning.

One easy way to balance this is to use child directed play. You set out some toys and things they can choose to interact with. (An invitation to play.) Then follow their lead. What do they want to do? It doesn’t matter what they play with – whatever captures their interest is the thing that they are most ready to learn about in the moment.

As they play with something, try to create a “serve and return” rhythm. They show you something – you react and talk about it – they give it to you – you give it back – they stack one block on top of another – you copy them and stack another block on top of that – they are surprised or delighted by something and you are too. This interactive, engaged turn-taking is one of the best ways to build a child’s brain.

Other simple ways to play are imitation - copy what they are doing, narration – talk about what they are doing, and scaffolding – take what they are doing but then stretch it a little. They are throwing a ball – you give them a basket to throw it into. But don’t feel like you should always be stretching – remember to let them repeat the same thing again and again if they are still enjoying it. Repetition builds mastery and doing something that you are good at builds your confidence and is really satisfying.

When their attention moves on to a new activity, follow their lead. If they stop engaging in new things or are getting fussy, they probably need a break – some downtime to process all the new learning. Respect that and let them take a break. Their engagement cues will let you know when they’re ready to play again.