
Healthy baby: it's all about caring for your child

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Side by side: How babies play

In Mommy & Me classes, sandboxes and other places where babies meet babies, it may look as if they are playing together, but appearances can be deceiving. "Social play is really minimal until babies are about 2 1/2 or 3 years old," says Joan Almon, coordinator for the U.S. Alliance for Childhood, a Maryland-based nonprofit organization dedicated to children's health and well-being. "Children younger than this play next to each other, which is known as parallel play. And as they do, they are very engaged with their physical bodies--they will touch and put in their mouths whatever is around, including another baby's hand or toy."

Stages of play Do little babies even know they are playing with each other? "One can't say for sure," Almon says, "but most babies just light up when they see other babies. They have their own world and feel comfortable with one another." At ages 2 to 3, Almon says, children move beyond parallel play and start to engage in make-believe. "They will pretend to cook cereal and perform other simple acts. And then at some point, they will involve other people in their play--playing house or building a rocket ship together, for example."

What's a parent to do? It can be frustrating for parents to constantly have to intervene to undo a grasped fistful of hair or retrieve a "stolen" toy. Still, it's important to get babies together, and not just for the babies' sake. "It is really good for parents to seek out other parents when their babies are little," Almon says. "Mothers are often home alone with babies, which is unnatural. Classes help create a sense of neighborhood." It doesn't

have to be a big group; even a small, local one--with a knowledgeable leader--is all you need. Check recreation centers, nursery schools and churches for play groups, music classes and Mommy & Me meetings.

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--MARY JANE HORTON

Doctor visits

(the first year)

Between well-baby checkups and illnesses or accidents, you probably will see your baby's pediatrician more during the first year than at any other time. The baby's first exam will take place the day he is born or the day after. He'll typically visit his doctor one to two weeks later, and then have monthly or bimonthly checkups until his first birthday. Here's what your child's physician likely will do at these visits:

- * Administer immunizations (at the two-, four-, six- and 12-month checkups).
- * Measure your baby's height, weight and head circumference.
- * Evaluate your baby's vision, hearing and physical and cognitive development.
- * Discuss eating and sleeping habits.
- * Ask about any special concerns you may have.

--D.S.

Finding Dr. Right

How to choose a pediatrician you and your baby both will love

Locating a great pediatrician can take time and patience, so it's a good idea to start while you are still pregnant. Considering that this potentially is the person who will guide your child's care for the next 18 years, the effort is well worth it.

The basics First, compile a list of potential doctors, asking friends and prenatal caregivers for recommendations. Even before you meet the doctor in person, there are a number of simple but important questions to ask, many of which can be answered by the staff over the telephone. (Call in the afternoon when the office is less busy.) Here are some typical questions:

- * Is the office open in the early morning, evenings or on weekends? Who are the doctors on call when the office is closed?
- * Are there regular call-in hours for talks with the pediatrician?
- * How are emergencies handled? Will you have to go through a paging service? Will the doctor meet you at the hospital?

Your next step is to schedule a visit with the pediatrician. While many doctors don't bill for this initial interview, some will charge for an office visit. Be prepared to ask a number of questions that are important to you, such as:

- * Do you support breastfeeding? Until the child is what age?
- * How do you feel about circumcision?
- * What are your views on the use of antibiotics?
- * How do you treat ear infections?
- * Are you open to alternative treatments for some illnesses?
- * How do you feel about immunizations?
- * Are you trained to care for a child with special needs?

Even if you and the pediatrician don't agree on every issue, you still can make the partnership work, but it's wise to know from the beginning whether your philosophies are similar.

How is the office run? When you visit the office for your interview with the pediatrician, pay attention to the way business is conducted. Are the staff members courteous? Are they accommodating to people in the waiting room? Also notice whether ill children are shown into exam rooms quickly to minimize the spread of germs. When you do find Dr. Right, you'll realize your time was well spent.

--DANA SULLIVAN

Autism: Early detection is crucial

The earlier autism is diagnosed, the better the chances are that a child will improve with treatment--and live a more normal life. In fact, researchers recently have identified behaviors that can help parents spot autism in children as young as 4 months.

Early detection is critical since it often can take up to one year after diagnosis to get into a treatment program, says Geraldine Dawson, Ph.D., director of the University of Washington Autism Center. She and other experts contend that behavioral therapy has the biggest impact on a child younger than 4 years old.

While early detection is clearly a goal, pediatricians often are pressed for time. Also, current tests for autism were created with 2-year-olds in mind. Parents, therefore, are the first line of defense. To help, First Signs Inc., a nonprofit program dedicated to early detection of autism, has created a checklist of key social, emotional and communication milestones beginning at 4 months so parents can discuss any concerns with their physicians early on.

Nancy Wiseman, founder and president of First Signs, suggests parents observe whether their 4-month-old baby:

- * Follows and reacts to bright colors, movement and objects
- * Turns toward sounds
- * Shows interest in watching people's faces
- * Smiles back when you smile

"Parents should look for the presence of social reciprocity, the back and forth, give and take between a child and his care-giver. It's the cornerstone of healthy development," Wiseman says. "If it's missing, they need to have their child evaluated right away." According to Dawson, the main warning signs of autism may be detected by 12 months. These include:

* Failure to make eye contact

* Failure to point

* Failure to show things to others, such as bringing a toy to parents

* Failure to orient when his name is called

* Failure to babble communicatively, i.e., saying "da da" or "ma ma"

For a complete list of resources and a screening test to assist parents, go to www.firstsigns.org. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has information about autism and treatment options on its site, www.cdc.gov/actearly.

--LAURA ROE STEVENS

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