

How do babies and young children learn?

Learning in homes and communities is quite different to the type of learning that often happens in schools. However, learning in homes and communities is just as important as school learning. Some parents and caregivers believe that learning begins at school and not think that they have a role to play in supporting their children's development. Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers, but often feel that they lack the knowledge and resources to play this role with confidence.

We know from research that young children who have had learning opportunities before they start school, are more likely do well at school. We also know that there are many things that caregivers can do to support young children's development. Caregivers are mediators of learning which means that they fit in the space between the child and the world, and thereby help children to make sense of their experiences. Children are born wanting to learn and even tiny babies will use all their senses to explore and learn about the world around them. Although children can discover some things on their own, in order to learn and develop, young children need relationships, and in particular, relationships where their caregiver responds to their interests and efforts. Nurturing and trusting relationships are the cornerstones of all learning.

Most caregivers want the best for their children but might not know enough about activities and experiences that best support young children's development. Young children do not learn in the same ways that adults learn and this section provides information about how young children learn and what sort of experiences are optimal for their learning and development.

What do you know about how young children learn? If someone asked you for advice about how to support a young child's learning, what would you suggest?

1. Learning happens during everyday experiences in the home, at the shops, in the street, at the clinic, in the taxi, at the library, in the yard, at church and mosque, in the park, and in many other everyday contexts. Babies and children learn best when they are interested in something and want to know more. The best learning moments often begin with a child showing an interest in something or asking a question. Babies may use gestures and simple sounds to show their interest in something. Caregivers can support a young child's learning by following their interest, participating with them and contributing to what they say and do.



2. Babies and young children learn through communicating (listening and talking). From birth, babies try to communicate with caregivers through crying, babbling and gestures. They will try to communicate even before they can say words correctly, and by responding positively caregivers will encourage them to try and talk more. Young children understand far more than they can say and the more caregivers talk with them, the more they learn.



3. Babies and young children learn best by doing and by being involved in hands-on activities. They will remember new words much more easily when the word goes with a real experience. They love to be included in 'grown-up' tasks and most of a young child's early learning will take place while doing something alongside a caregiver or sibling. Through 'guided participation', they will gradually learn to do a task on their own. Just as an apprentice learns a job from a master or someone skilled in that job, children learn new skills by being apprentices to older siblings and other members of the community.



Think of how you learn something new as an adult, for example, learning to drive. You would drive with someone who knows how to drive and observe them as they explain what they are doing. They might let you drive while they sit alongside you until the point that you are doing the driving yourself! You are participating in a real activity and learning by being an apprentice.

In your community, what are the things that children are expected to learn to do? What do they learn by participating in activities with adults? For example, in some communities, young children learn to weave or care for animals at a very young age. They learn by participating together with skilled adults in their community. What else do children learn in this way?

4. Babies and young children learn through play. Play can mean many things: outdoor physical activities; playing with sand or water; pretend play with friends or alone; playing with blocks and construction toys; playing listening games, guessing games or card games. Although some play activities need extra time and resources, children often enjoy playing with everyday objects around the house and simple homemade materials.



Children often love to pretend, and pretend play is a very good way to support their learning. Can you think of any pretend games that young children might enjoy? A pretend shop is easy to set up with old boxes, plastic containers and other items from the kitchen. Scrap paper can be used for pretend money. Young children also enjoy role playing routines around the house such as cooking and washing. If they play with older siblings, they will be learning many things and using language to negotiate roles and explain what they are doing. This is very important for school learning.

5. Babies and young children use their bodies to explore and learn about the world around them. They learn best when they are active and doing things. Caregivers often find it difficult to manage young children when they reach for nearby objects, climb on things, crawl under things and jump off things. Although it is important to ensure that children do not hurt themselves, caregivers should allow them to use their bodies to explore the space around them, as this is the way they learn about their body and the world.



6. Babies and young children learn through rhythm and song. Young children need to move and find it difficult to sit still for a long time. This is why action songs and rhymes are so important for early development. Even very young children can participate in actions for songs or sing along to familiar rhymes. Children learn more easily when they can link new words and ideas with actions and songs.



7. Babies and young children need and enjoy repetition. Babies and young children need to hear the same words many times to learn their meanings. They are happy to sing the same song, hear the same story or to play the same game over and over again. Repetition helps to reinforce learning and gives children the confidence to try ways of doing things. Caregivers need to be patient when children want to repeat activities and games rather than trying to hurry them on to something new.

8. Children learn through hearing and telling stories. This is an easy and natural way to develop language and prepare children for the language of books. Stories can be traditional tales, or they can be family stories about long ago events or something that happened recently. Young children love participating in storytelling and as their language develops they will enjoy telling their own stories to caregivers who show interest and value what they have to say. If children learn to tell good stories when they are young, it will be easier for them to write good stories when they go to school one day.

Stories we tell can also be about something that is going to happen. Children learn about all the parts of a good story when we explain to them ‘where’ we are going, ‘how’ we will get there, ‘why’ we are going, ‘what’ we will do first, ‘what’ you will do after that and then how an outing will end.

9. Children learn through asking and answering questions. When children ask questions it means they are really thinking! It is very important that children feel safe asking questions and giving answers, even if their answers are not always correct. Mistakes and wrong answers are part of learning together. Through asking questions children learn how different experiences are connected and the more they ask questions and explain their ideas, the quicker their language and thinking skills will grow. By asking questions caregivers can help children to make links between past, present and future experiences (for example, ‘do you remember when we did this?’; ‘where have we seen something like this before?’).

How do you feel about children asking questions? Do the adults in your community encourage children to ask questions or is there a sense that children should be ‘seen and not heard’?

10. Babies and children learn about the world through sharing books with caregivers. Books give children a chance to hear language that is different to everyday language in homes and on the street. Books also give children a chance to learn new words and find out about things that are not part of everyday life in their community. Booksharing is best when it includes talking about books before, during and after reading them. The talk about what is in a book is just as important as the words that are written in a book.



Books are often expensive and community libraries are an important resource. Caregivers need to be encouraged to join the local library and ask for books that are appropriate for babies and young children. If there is not a library in a local community, then simple books can be made from paper or recycled cardboard.

11. Young children learn by looking for solutions to problems, trying different strategies and seeing what works. They are naturally curious and want to know and understand how things work. Their problem-solving is likely to be based on trial and error (trying and making mistakes) and it is important that they are not scared of being wrong. It is also important that caregivers allow them to try without correcting them. By supporting their problem solving and valuing persistence, caregivers help children to gather information and learn new things.

12. Young children learn best when they are feeling good about themselves and getting encouragement and positive feedback. They need to experience success to keep motivated and this means that caregivers will need to adjust the difficulty of an activity to match the child's level of skill or assist children with aspects of a task that are difficult for them to do on their own. Positive reinforcement should be well timed and a child should know exactly what they have done that was worthy of praise. Children should be rewarded for trying and not only for getting things right.

13. Children learn when they are helped to stay focused on a task or activity. This might mean reducing the noise or taking away toys or objects that might distract their attention. Caregivers can also help children to stay focused by pointing out important parts of the activity or modelling how to approach a task. Children need many opportunities to participate in tasks alongside a sibling or caregiver and thereby develop their ability to stay focused.



14. Children need to learn how to learn. This means that they must learn to manage or regulate their behaviour. Through completing an activity together with a responsive caregiver, children learn how to slow down, think before acting and not respond impulsively. Children learn to control their impulses, change plans and manage their frustration when a task is difficult to solve. They learn to think ahead and consider alternatives rather than just responding impulsively. Caregivers who give children opportunities to wait their turn, listen to instructions and participate in planning a task are helping children to learn to self-regulate.



Do you want to know more about Wordworks?

Contact us on:

www.wordworks.org.za

Tel: 021 788 9233 | Email: info@wordworks.org.za

Address: 2 Jacobs Ladder, St James, 7945

I am growing, I am learning, I am talking

birth to 18 months

- I try to communicate in lots of ways, using sounds and gestures.
- I like listening to you talk and watching your face.
- I recognise some words and phrases.
- I love repetitive games and songs, particularly if they have actions.



1 and 2 year-olds

- I try to say some words and even short phrases.
- I get frustrated when you don't listen or understand me.
- I learn new words really quickly, even if I can't say them all.
- I enjoy repetitive songs and action rhymes.



2 and 3 year-olds

- I am saying lots of words and starting to use longer sentences.
- I may still find some sounds difficult to say correctly.
- I enjoy conversations with adults I know well.
- I am asking questions to help me find things out.
- I love looking at books and talking about the pictures.



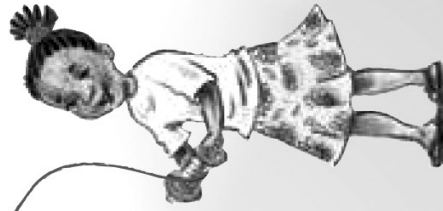
3 and 4 year-olds

- I can say and understand quite complicated sentences.
- I am using my talk to play with other children.
- I can talk about things that I've done and plan to do.
- I ask lots of 'why?' questions.
- I can listen to longer stories and talk about what I've heard.



4 and 5 year-olds

- I take part in longer conversations.
- I can express what I need and co-operate with others.
- I am using language to help me think and work things out.
- I am getting better at listening and paying attention.
- I love sharing books, asking questions and pretending to read.



Ndiyakhula, ndiyafunda, ndiyathetha

Ekuzalweni ukuya kwiinyanga ezili 18

- Ndizama ukunxibelelana ngeendlela ezininzi, ndisebenzisa izandi nokulinganisa.
- Ndiyathanda ukukumamela uthetha kunye nokubuka ubuso bakho.
- Ndiyawagonda amagama athile namabinza athile.
- Ndiyayithanda imidlalo kunye neengoma ngakumbi xa zineentshukumo.



Unyaka o 1 ukuya kwemi 2

- Ndiyazama ukuthetha amagama athile niqu namabinzana amafutshane.
- Ndiyadana xa ungandimameli kwaye undive.
- Ndifunda amagama amatsha kwamsinyane, nokubangaba andikwazi ukuwathetha.
- Ndiyazithanda iingoma kunye neentshukumo.



Iminyaka emi 2 ukuya kwemi 3

- Ndithetha amagama amaninzi kwaye ndiyaqalisa ukusebenzisa izivakalisi ezinde.
- Ndingafumanisa ezinye izandi zinzima ukuzibiza ngokuchanekileyo.
- Ndiyayonwabela incoko nabantu abadala endibazi kakuhle.
- Ndibuza imibuzo yokundinceda ndifumanise izinto.
- Ndiyakuthanda ukujonga iincwadi kwaye ndithethe ngemifanekiso.



Iminyaka emi 3 ukuya kwemi 4

- Ndingathetha kwaye ndiqonde izivakalisi ezinzima.
- Ndisebenzisa intetho ukudlala nabanye abantwana.
- Ndingathetha ngezinto endizenzileyo nendiceba ukuzenza.
- Ndibuza imibuzo emininzi ethi 'kutheni?'
- Ndingamamela amabali amade kwaye ndithethe ngendikuvileyo.



Iminyaka emi 4 ukuya kwemi 5

- Ndithabatha inxaxheba kwiincoko ezinde.
- Ndingakuvakalisa endikudingayo kwaye ndisebenzisane nabanye.
- Ndisebenzisa ulwimi ukundinceda ndicinge kwaye ndisombulule izinto.
- Ndibangcono ekumameleni nasekuqwalaseleni.
- Ndiyakuthanda ukufunda iincwadi nabanye, ukubuza imibuzo nokulinganisa ukufunda.



Ek groei, ek leer, ek praat

Geboorte tot 18 maande

- Ek probeer op verskeie maniere kommunikeer deur geluide en gebare te gebruik.
- Ek hou daarvan om te luister as jy gesels en hou jou gesig deurgaans dop.
- Ek herken sekere woorde en frases.
- Ek geniet repiterende speletjies en liedjies, veral as hulle aksies ook by het.



1 en 2 -jariges

- Ek probeer sommige woorde en selfs kort frases sê.
- Ek raak gefrustreerd as jy nie na my luister nie of my nie verstaan nie.
- Ek leer baie vinnig nuwe woorde, selfs al kan ek hulle nie almal sê nie.
- Ek geniet liedjies en aksierympies.



2 en 3 -jariges

- Ek kan baie woorde sê en begin langer sinne gebruik.
- Ek vind sommige klanke dalk nog moeilik om reg uit te spreek.
- Ek geniet gesprekke met volwassenes wat ek goed ken.
- Ek vra vrae om my te help om goed uit te vind.
- Ek geniet dit baie om in boeke te kyk en oor die prente te gesels.



3 en 4 -jariges

- Ek kan taamlike ingewikkelde sinne sê en verstaan.
- Ek gebruik my spraak om met ander kinders te speel.
- Ek kan gesels oor wat ek gedoen het, of wat ek beplan om te doen.
- Ek vra baie 'hoekom' vrae.
- Ek kan na langer stories luister en oor die stories gesels.



4 en 5 -jariges

- Ek neem aan langer gesprekke deel.
- Ek kan my behoeftes uitdruk en met ander saamwerk.
- Ek gebruik taal om my te help om te dink en dinge uit te pluus.
- Ek verbeter ten opsigte van my luistervermoë en om my aandag by iets te bepaal.
- Ek geniet dit om boeke met ander te deel, vrae te vra en te maak of ek lees.

