



20 Ways to Boost Your Baby's Brain Power

These easy, everyday moves can help your baby — and later your toddler — further develop language, attention, and reasoning skills.

By Kelsey Kloss



At birth, your baby's brain contains 100 billion neurons (as many as there are stars in the Milky Way!). During his first years, he will grow trillions of brain-cell connections, called neural synapses. Pretty impressive, right?

But here's the thing: The rule for brain wiring is to use it or lose it. Synapses that are not "wired together" through stimulation are pruned and lost during a child's school years. Although an infant's brain does have some neurological hard-wiring, such as the ability to learn any language, it is more pliable and more vulnerable than a grown-up's brain. And, amazingly, a toddler's brain has twice as many neural connections as an adult's.

When you provide loving, language-enriched experiences for your baby, you are giving his brain's neural connections and pathways more opportunities to become wired together. In turn, he will acquire rich language, reasoning, and planning skills. These easy tips, stimulating books and supervised, interactive activities will help make sure your young child's brain is primed for years of learning ahead.

1. Give your baby a good start before birth. Stay healthy while you are pregnant, and be aware that certain drugs can be destructive to your baby's brain in utero. Many children who were drug-abused in the womb struggle with severe learning problems and suddenly act with unprovoked aggressive behaviors. Studies have also revealed that cigarette smoking during pregnancy is linked with lower fourth-grade reading scores.

2. Turn up the baby talk. Respond to infant coos with delighted vocalizations, and slowly draw out your syllables in a high-pitched voice as you exclaim phrases like "pretty baby." This way of speaking is called parentese, and the exaggerated facial expressions and drawn-out vowels help your child absorb all the sounds of our language. Remember: The areas of the brain responsible for understanding speech and producing language need your rich input.

Book Pick: *Baby Shark* This silly sing-along story based on a well-loved song can easily be read in parentese. Your baby will absorb the many sounds of the English language as you talk about a baby shark, mama shark, and grandpa shark, and sing the melodic "Doo doo doo!" verses in between.

3. Play games that involve hands. Activities like patty-cake, peekaboo, this little piggy, or even puppets engage your baby and capture her attention. Using your hands shows young children how we physically interact with our world — plus, hands-on activities are simply more fun for both of you!

Toy Pick: Narwhal & Jelly Finger Puppet Pair Make playtime hands-on with these fun-sized, dynamic duo of puppets, which spark the imagination of your child while providing hilarious, interactive play.

4. Be attentive. When your young child points, be sure to follow with your gaze and remark on items or events of interest to her. This "joint attention" confirms how important her interests and observations are to you.

Toy Pick: Hand Pointers Set of 3 For little learners ages 3 and up, these hand pointers make it even easier for you and your child to interact about topics of interest—and they're also great for imaginative play, like pretend school!

5. Foster an early passion for books. Choose books with large and colorful pictures, and share your baby's delight in pointing at certain images or even making noises that correspond with the book — like *glub glub* when you see a fish. Modulate the tone of your voice, simplify or elaborate on story lines, and encourage toddlers to talk about books (**here are some good options for sounds and wordplay**). Remember that building your baby's receptive language (understanding spoken words) is more important than developing his expressive language (speaking) in infancy.

Book Pick: *1, 2, 3 in the Sea* Colorful sea creatures including whales and fish star in this vibrant board book, which features gatefolds and a giant pop-up to show children just how fun reading can be.

6. Build your baby's love of her own body. Stroke her tummy and hair when reading, playing, or even diapering. Studies have shown that babies who are not often touched have brains that are smaller than normal for their age, and interacting with her close-up also helps direct her attention to your speech.

Book Pick: *I Love You Through and Through* Make reading time extra cuddly and touchy-feely with this classic book, which features a sweet storyline about unconditional love. Bonus: It comes with a soft, snuggly bear for your baby or toddler to hug!

7. Choose toys that allow babies to explore and interact. Toys such as a windup jack-in-the-box or stackable blocks help your baby learn cause-and-effect relationships and "if-then" reasoning. For instance, if a child stacks too many blocks without straightening them, they fall down. If he successfully stacks blocks on top of each other, he "wires in" that information.

Toy Pick: Activity Blocks Make blocks an even greater learning opportunity for your child with this block puzzle set with 32 blocks. Each has upper case printed letters and punctuation marks, two styles of lower case letters in print and script, along with animal pictures, and mosaic patterns.

8. Respond promptly when your baby cries. Soothe, nurture, cuddle, and reassure her so that you build positive brain circuitry in the limbic area of the brain, which is involved in emotions. Your calm holding and cuddling, and your day-to-day engagement with your baby, signal emotional security to the brain.

Toy Pick: Nursery Verse 11" Goose Musical Soothe ruffled feathers with this adorable, soft plush, which plays "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to help comfort an upset little one.

9. Build trust by being attentive and focused. When your child is playing, resist the temptation to check Instagram. Instead, get on the ground and spend time interacting with him. Babies who are securely attached to you emotionally will be able to invest more energy in the pleasures of exploration, learning, and discovery.

10. Give her a body massage. This can lower your infant's stress levels and enhance her feelings of well-being and emotional security. Loving touches even promote growth in young babies: Research has shown that premature babies who are massaged three times daily are ready to leave the hospital days earlier than babies who do not receive massages.

Book Pick: *The Kissing Hand* Communicate the idea of loving touch with Chester from *The Kissing Hand*. In the book, Chester's mother shows him that she can kiss his hand in the morning and he'll feel the warmth there when you read this classic aloud.

11. Enlist help from your toddler at clean-up times. This is a wonderful way to practice categorization. Toddlers learn that stuffed animals have one place to go for "night-night" time; cars, trucks, and other vehicles also have their special storage place. Children need to learn about sorting into categories and seriation (placing things in order; for example, from smallest to largest) as part of their cognitive advancement in preschool.

Book Pick: *How Do Dinosaurs Clean Their Rooms?* This sweet story about a frolicsome dinosaur tasked to clean up promotes organizational skills and responsibility through loads of laughter and positive reinforcement.

12. Set up a safe environment for your crawling baby or toddler. Your mobile child will begin to understand spatial parameters and vocabulary such as under, over, big, little, near, and far, plus the relationship between objects of different shapes and sizes (those that are big versus little, for instance). He will start to establish mental maps of his environment and a comfortable relationship with the world in which he lives.

Book Pick: *The Three Little Fish and the Big Bad Shark* An under-the-sea retelling of "The Three Little Pigs" will provide a colorful story and a big laugh for your child, all while supporting the development of spatial skills and vocabulary.

13. Sing those nursery rhyme songs you remember. When you can, add body motions and finger play (like waving your arms during "You Are My Sunshine" or miming rain falling during "Rain, Rain, Go Away"). This helps your baby connect sounds with large and small motor actions. Songs also enhance your child's learning of rhythms, rhymes, and language patterns.

Book Pick: *We Love to Sing Along!* With this cheerful padded board book, you and your child can sing along to four classic songs: "You Are My Sunshine," "The More We Get Together," "Rain, Rain, Go Away," and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

14. Match your tempo to your child's temperament. Some children adjust easily to strange situations — some are bold and impulsive, and some are quite shy. Go with the flow as you try to increase a shy child's courage and comfort level, or help a highly active child safely use her fantastic energy while learning impulse control. Your acceptance will give her the comfort she needs to experiment and learn freely.

Book Pick: *I Love You Because You're You* Whether a youngster is feeling bashful or bold, playful or sad, a mother's love knows no bounds in this warm book about children's different temperaments and moods.

15. Make meals positive. Say the names of foods out loud as your baby eats. Express pleasure as he learns to feed himself, no matter how messy the initial attempts may be. This will create pleasant associations with mealtime and eating. Battles and nagging about food, on the other hand, can lead to negative brain patterns.

Book Pick: *My Very First Book of Food* Keep mealtimes positive by showing your child that animals love munching on food, too! In this split-page board book, children can match each animal — from a lion to a squirrel — with the delicious food it eats, such as milk or nuts.

16. Provide clear responses to your baby's actions. A young, developing brain learns to make sense of the world if you respond to your child's behavior in predictable, reassuring, and appropriate ways. Be as consistent as possible.

Book Pick: *Baby Faces: Hugs & Kisses* Also, show your baby an array of expressions through books! Babies are intrigued by other babies, and this photo collection of giggling, yawning, laughing, and smiling babies will capture their attention as they learn about normal emotional responses.

17. Use positive discipline. Create clear consequences without frightening or causing shame to your child. If your toddler acts inappropriately, such as by hitting another child, get down to her eye level, use a low, serious tone of voice, and clearly restate the rule. Keep rules simple, consistent, and reasonable for your child's age. Expecting a toddling baby not to touch a glass vase on a coffee table is unreasonable, but asking a toddler not to throw sand outside of the sandbox *is* reasonable.

Activity Pick: Good Citizenship Flash Cards These illustrated cards take a positive, friendly approach to teaching your child that we are all part of a larger community, and that certain responsibilities come with that — from never calling someone names to recycling.

18. Model empathic feelings for others. Use teachable moments when someone seems sad or upset to help your toddler learn about feelings, caring, sharing, and kindness. The more brain connections you create for empathic responses and gentle courtesies, the more these brain

circuits will be wired in. This helps not only with language and cognitive learning, but with positive emotional skills, too!

Book Pick: *Try a Little Kindness* Every page of this sweet picture book illustrates the importance of kindness. Your child will learn just how much it means to others when you tell them they're special, share a treat, and much more.

19. Arrange supervised play with messy materials. It can be water, sand, and even slime or goop! This will teach your child about the properties of liquids, solids, and mixtures — sensory experiences that are crucial for the learning brain.

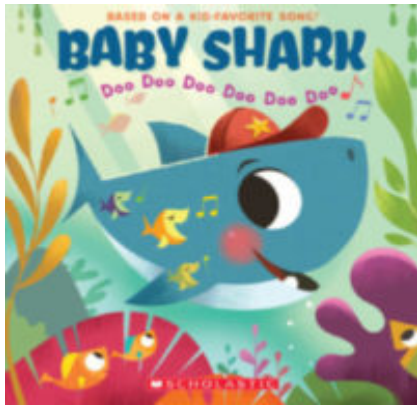
Activity Pick: *The Magic School Bus Diving Into Slime, Gel, and Goop Science Kit* Let your young scientist explore a slimy, goopy mix of textures and materials with this set of fabulous experiments. With the guidance of Ms. Frizzle, little learners can create glue from milk, grow jiggly marbles, and even make snow from crystals!

20. Express joy and interest in your baby. Let your body language, your shining eyes, your attentiveness to babbling and baby activities, and your gentle caresses and smiles validate the deeply lovable nature of your little one.

Toy Pick: *How Do Dinosaurs Say I Love You? Doll* Show your child just how much joy and love they bring into your life with this adorable, soft dinosaur plush that holds a cushy heart from the remarkable *How Do Dinosaurs...* book series.

As always, supervise your child's play with these toys. Some may require your help until baby is of age!

Featured Books & Toys



PAPERBACK BOOK

Baby Shark

GRADES

Pre-K - K

Baby Shark! Doo doo doo doo doo doo! Baby Shark! Doo doo doo doo doo doo!Baby Shark! Doo doo doo doo doo doo!Baby Shark! Baby Shark has become well-known and well-loved by teachers, parents, and children...

[Learn More](#)

\$6.99 ~~\$6.99~~

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STUFFED TOYS

Narwhal and Jelly Finger Puppet Pair

GRADES

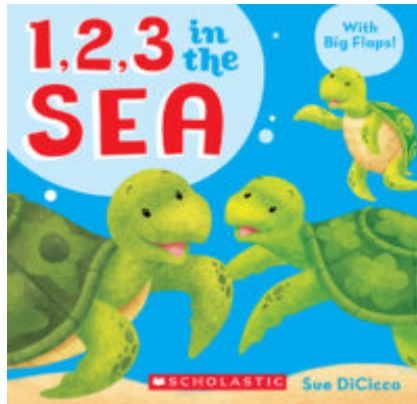
Pre-K - 2

Here are two unlikely best friends, ready to welcome you to their pod and swim off on imaginary underwater adventures. Narwhal (the unicorn of the sea!) and his jellyfish playmate are made of soft fabric,...

[Learn More](#)

\$14.00 ~~\$14.00~~

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BOARD BOOK

1, 2, 3 in the Sea

GRADES

Early Childhood - Pre-K

Count to two and then three with the help of these sea animals in this board book with gatefolds and a giant pop-up! Bold and bright, each spread in this novelty board book features a different ocean animal...

[Learn More](#)

\$6.99 ~~\$6.99~~

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BOARD BOOK

I Love You Through and Through (Board Book and Plush)

GRADES

Pre-K

I LOVE YOU THROUGH AND THROUGH now comes with a very special teddy bear plush! This bestselling classic written by Bernadette Rosetti-Shustak and illustrated by Caroline Jayne Church celebrates the unconditional...

[Learn More](#)

\$14.99 ~~\$14.99~~

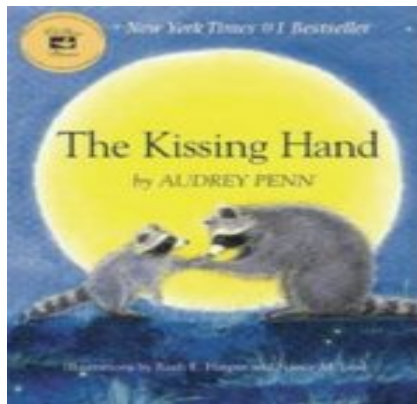
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**STUFFED TOYS****Nursery Verse 11" Goose Musical**

GRADES

Early Childhood - Pre-K

Cozy up to creature comforts for the nursery in luxurious textures and timeless style. Soothe ruffled feathers at bedtime with the wind-up 11" Goose Musical that plays "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star".

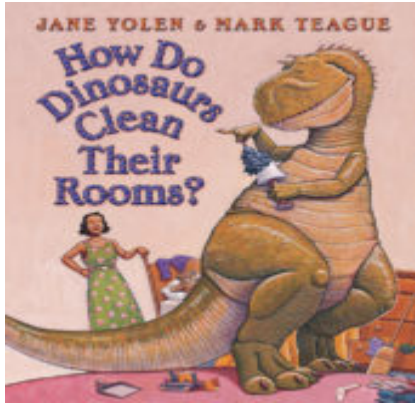
[Learn More](#)\$19.97 ~~\$28.00~~**Out of Stock****PICTURE BOOK****The Kissing Hand**

GRADES

Pre-K - K

In this contemporary classic Chester Raccoon seeks love and reassurance from his mother as he ventures out into the world to attend his very first day of school.

[Learn More](#)\$15.99 ~~\$17.95~~**ADD TO CART**

**BOARD BOOK****How Do Dinosaurs Clean Their Rooms?**

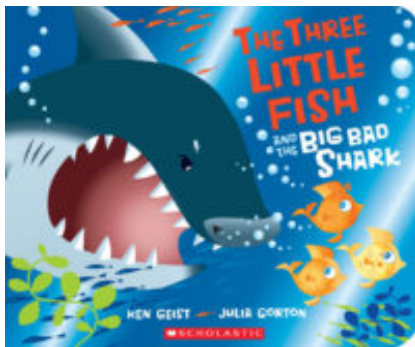
GRADES

Early Childhood - Pre-K

Having trouble getting your toddler to pick up his crayons? Let these frolicsome dinosaurs give him a tip or two. By the end of the story, your child will be asking to store his own toys! (And don't be...

[Learn More](#)\$6.99 ~~\$6.99~~

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**BOARD BOOK****The Three Little Fish and the Big Bad Shark**

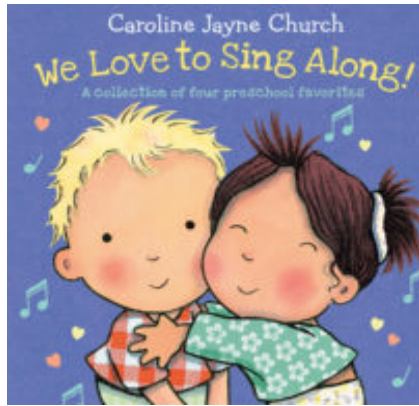
GRADES

Pre-K

An under-the-sea retelling of The Three Little Pigs in a chunky, hands-on board book! "Little fish, little fish, let me come in!" "Not by the skin of my finny fin fin!" "Then I'll munch, and I'll crunch, and..."

[Learn More](#)\$6.99 ~~\$6.99~~

ADD TO CART



BOARD BOOK

We Love to Sing Along! A Treasury of Four Classic Songs

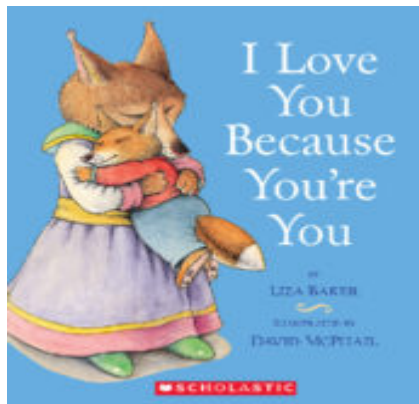
GRADES
Pre-K

Sing along to these beloved preschool songs with bestselling illustrator Caroline Jayne Church! The perfect first book for every preschooler! Introduce children to four classic sing-alongs with this cheerful...

[Learn More](#)

\$8.99 ~~\$8.99~~

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PICTURE BOOK

I Love You Because You're You

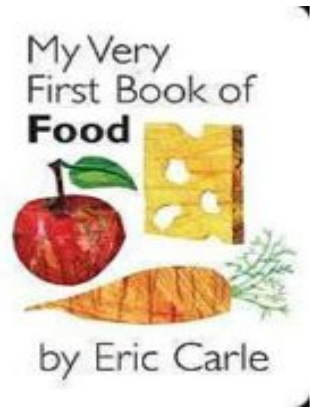
GRADES
Pre-K

A mother fox's affection for her little one is played out in greeting-card sentiments and McPhail's (If You Were My Bunny) winning artwork. Reassuring quatrains ("I love you when you're sad/ and need a...

[Learn More](#)

\$7.19 ~~\$8.99~~

ADD TO CART

**BOARD BOOK****My Very First Book of Food**

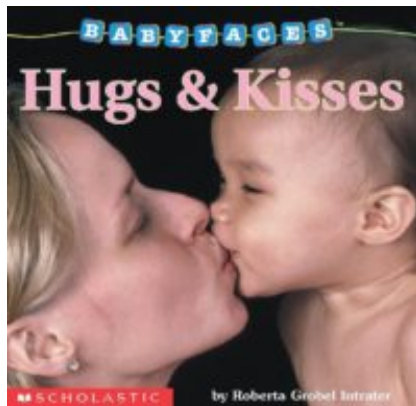
GRADES

Early Childhood - K

Feast your eyes on the latest split-page board books from Eric Carle. In the sumptuous My Very First Book of Food, children can match each animal with the food it eats. Do you know what a squirrel eats?...

[Learn More](#)\$5.99 ~~\$5.99~~

ADD TO CART

**BOARD BOOK****Baby Faces: Hugs and Kisses**

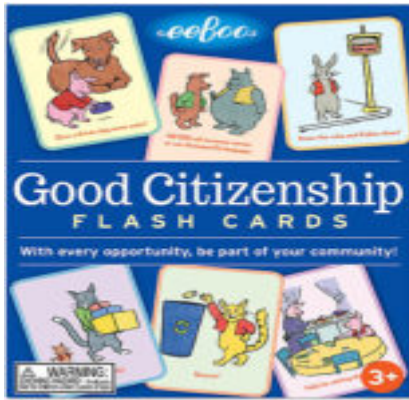
GRADES

Early Childhood - Pre-K

Babies are fascinated by other babies and will love to hold these small, sturdy books and gaze at giggling, laughing, yawning, and smiling babies. Candid and adorable photographs capture all kinds of babies...

[Learn More](#)\$4.99 ~~\$4.99~~

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**LEARNING CARDS****Good Citizenship Flash Cards**

GRADES

Pre-K - 1

Conscientious animals demonstrate responsible community behavior. Start a conversation about social responsibility! Good citizenship skills are an essential part of early education. Children must learn...

[Learn More](#)

\$11.99 ~~\$11.99~~

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**HARDCOVER BOOK****Try a Little Kindness**

GRADES

Pre-K - K

In this funny picture book, bestselling illustrator Henry Cole shows kids different ways to be kind with his hysterical cartoon animal characters. Each page features a different way to be a good person,...

[Learn More](#)

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**SCIENCE EXPERIMENTS****The Magic School Bus Diving Into Slime, Gel, and Goop Science Kit**

GRADES

K - 12

Soar into Science aboard The Magic School Bus! Ms. Frizzle and her students take Young Scientists diving into slime, gel, and goop with fun and fabulous experiments. Young Scientists discover oobleck,...

[Learn More](#)

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STUFFED TOYS

14" How Do Dinosaurs Say I Love You? Doll

GRADES

Pre-K - K

Jane Yolen and Mark Teague's remarkable series is a delight for children and adults. The books are a warm and no-nonsense way of helping kids manage the important things in their lives - going to bed,...

[Learn More](#)

\$20.00 ~~\$20.00~~

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