

# BANANAS HANDOUT

Exploring the Senses with Infants and Toddlers

## Seeing

From birth, babies like to look at all kinds of objects: bright, shiny, moving things; objects of different sizes, shapes and colors. Talking to babies about what you see helps them develop their minds and learn about their world.

### What You Can Do

- **Look at baby.** Eye contact is critical for social development. (If a baby is blind or has vision limitations, it is important to compensate by engaging other senses, such as hearing, touching, tasting or smelling.)
- **Display mirrors, pictures and interesting objects** just out of reach on the floor, on the wall near the changing table, near her bed.
- **Talk about the colors, shapes or names of objects**, for example:
  - look in a mirror and talk about your faces
  - point to and name pictures in a book
  - look at moving things like mobiles, blowing leaves, bubbles, rolling balls
  - play peek-a-boo
  - make toys – and people – disappear and come back
  - look at baby, talk about body parts
  - look out the window and talk about what you see
- **Dim the lights and shine a flashlight** on the ceiling, walls, floor, baby's hands, feet and tummy. Use colored cellophane to create different colors. Use broadbeam lights and penlights for different effects.

**Toys to Make** – remember to supervise babies when they are playing with these toys.

- **Make a peek-a-boo face.** Draw or paste a picture of a face on a piece of cardboard. Cover the face with a piece of material taped or stapled to the top that can be lifted like a curtain. It will be most fun for baby if you play peek-a-boo with him, but you might fasten the face to his playpen crib or changing table for occasional independent play.
- **Make toys that dangle and flutter.** Use colorful ribbons, shiny foil tins, paper shapes. Or, make a simple mobile by fastening colorful shapes or objects to a coat hanger. Hang these where baby can watch them. These are to look at, not touch, so fasten them tightly out of baby's reach. Add to them and change them from time to time.
- **Fill a clear plastic bottle** with equal amounts of water and vegetable oil and a few drops of food color. Glue the lid on and cover with duct tape. You can also add a squirt of dishwashing liquid for bubbles and small floating toys or glitter. Let baby push and watch.

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## Touching

Babies learn about themselves, their bodies and their world through touch. Adults create relationships with babies through touch. Babies with sensory or motor disabilities need touching even more, since other ways of communicating may be blocked. However, keep in mind that some babies are hypersensitive to touch. Observe how babies respond. Be slow and gentle.

### What You Can Do

- **Let baby feel and touch things** inside and out-of-doors – leaves, trees, grass, wood, blankets, ice, slippery soap and tickly feathers. Touch the window on a cold and/or a hot day. Keep a box of scraps of cloth of many textures for baby to play with.
- **Touch baby's face and let baby touch your face.** Talk about noses, ears, hair, etc. Massage your baby. Use different kinds of gentle oils and lotions. Let baby know how much you enjoy her. Sing. Coo. Make happy noises.
- **Let baby feed herself**, let her play with food like jell-o, ice cream, cooked spaghetti, yogurt, flour, oatmeal. No clothes or just a diaper will make cleanup easier (yes, it's messy). Follow with a bath.
- **Use a hand-held water spray** in the bath for different 'textures' of water. Also, pour water through a strainer, coffee filter, etc, onto baby's hands or feet. Sponges are fun to soak and squeeze. Encourage water play, but **never** leave a baby alone in water.
- **Use your hand to be a 'mousie' or a 'buzzing bee'** – fly around, sneak up baby's leg or arm, and tickle gently. Be sure baby can see you coming.
- **Give baby plenty of time on the floor on his tummy**, to practice and feel his legs and arms moving against a rug or blanket. Give him toys to reach for and touch.
- **Give lots of hugs and kisses.**

**Toys to Make** – remember to supervise babies when they are playing with these toys.

- **Make a texture quilt or ball** by stitching together fabric pieces with different textures – burlap, velvet, fake fur. Or, glue different textures on blocks or pieces of cardboard. (Make sure baby doesn't eat them!)
- **Pull a clean tube sock** over a small plastic container or cut a hand-sized hole in a box, then put different toys and objects inside. As soon as babies start reaching, help them reach to feel the objects inside. Older children can try to guess what's there.

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## Hearing

The world is full of sound and babies listen carefully to the sounds around them. They are storing up sounds for when they begin to talk. They are learning to identify the voices of family and friends, the sounds of dogs, cars, refrigerators and music. Even a baby who is deaf or hearing impaired is sensitive to rhythm and vibration.

### What You Can Do

- **Talk to baby!** It doesn't matter what you talk about; baby is learning that people talk. If you know a language other than English, use it! It is good for babies' brains to hear more than one language, and baby talk makes babies feel good even if they don't understand the words. Make it a conversation: take turns imitating each other's sounds.
- **Sing, play music, play instruments.** Make rhymes, recite poetry and tongue twisters. Play with language and sound. Don't worry about your skill – or lack thereof! What's important is that baby learns to enjoy language and music. Clap your hands. Whistle. Hum. Put your mouth against baby's head or tummy while you hum or sing.
- **Identify sounds** – “Do you hear the dog barking? What does the dog say? Woof! Woof!” Talk about loud sounds and soft sounds, BIG sounds and small sounds, sounds that startle baby and sounds that soothe. Be quiet and listen to the sounds in your environment and then talk about them.
- **Read to baby often.** Read some more. Read books and signs and cereal boxes. Read.
- **Let babies make noises** – tie a bell around their ankle or wrist, give them pots and pans to bang on, or wooden and metal wind chimes to kick.
- **Sing and dance.** Sing the songs of your own and other cultures – lullabies and play songs. Make up songs about activities like “Put your socks on, put your socks on, on your feet, on your feet, warm your little toesies, warm your little toesies, sweet sweet sweet, sweet sweet sweet” (to the tune of Frère Jacques). Make up your own tunes.
- **Tape record baby's sounds** and your voice and play it back for her.

**Toys to Make** – remember to supervise babies when they are playing with these toys.

- **Make bracelets or anklets** with jingle bells and string or elastic. Tie the bracelet to baby's wrist or ankle so he can make sounds when moving. Supervise – the bracelets can be dangerous if they come off.
- **Fill film or yogurt canisters** with sand, rice, beans, stones or other hard materials. Glue the lids on (make sure the lids are on securely) and let baby shake and roll them to make noises.
- **Make “drums” out of boxes**, bowls and pans made of metal, plastic, cardboard, paper or wood. Let baby pound with spoons, dowels, cardboard tubes, rattles, etc. Talk and sing into a paper towel roll.

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## Tasting

Eating is one of the most important activities in a baby's life. Being fed tells a baby she is loved and can depend on the world to care for her. Babies use their mouths to explore and learn. As babies grow older, the first level of investigation is to put everything in their mouths – which is why we must be very careful to keep small objects that babies might choke on out of their reach. If you are a child care provider, be sure to talk to parents before doing any of these activities.

### What You Can Do

- **Talk to baby about taste** – sweet, sour, salty, etc. – “The apple sauce tastes sweet doesn't it?”
- **Introduce different tastes** and pay attention to baby's reaction. Talk about this – “You don't like the lemon? Is it too sour?” or “Let's try a little cinnamon in our mashed banana.”
- **Let baby experience foods** such as mashed bananas, mashed potatoes and oatmeal.
- **Add vegetables to the diet** when baby is 5 - 6 months old. Cook and puree different vegetables, add color, texture, flavor. Introduce one vegetable at a time at 4 to 5-day intervals. (Some children have food allergies. Introducing foods one at a time makes it easier to identify which food causes an adverse reaction.)
- **Pay attention to baby's likes and dislikes.** Don't force him to eat food he doesn't like. Offer plenty of choices. Since baby's tastes change frequently, reintroduce previously rejected foods from time to time.
- **Let baby feed herself.** Give her foods that she can pick up, such as peas, bite-size pieces of grapes or Cheerios. Put up with the mess for a little while.
- **Play guessing games with food** with older children – “open your mouth and close your eyes and I'll give you a nice surprise.” Give bits of banana, pudding, yogurt and other foods that she enjoys.
- **Let baby put things in her mouth to explore.** Be sure that objects in baby's reach are clean and safe!

**Toys to Make** – remember to supervise babies when they are playing with these toys.

- **Make jell-o cubes in different flavors.** Let baby taste and play with them.
- **Make edible 'fingerpaint'** using pudding or jell-o for baby to smush, mush and taste.
- **Prepare a bland food** like mashed potatoes and flavor it with different spices, herbs and extracts. Let baby explore which she likes and which she doesn't. As baby gets older, let her choose flavors for mashed potatoes, oatmeal, cookies, yogurt, pancakes, etc. Taste apples and then make applesauce. Try it plain and then with spices.

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## Smelling

Smell, along with taste, is one of the first ways babies learn to identify the people who are most important to them. The world is full of interesting smells. The more smells and other sensory stimulations babies experience, the more their brains grow. For children who are blind or deaf, smell is an even more important tool for identifying people and events in their world. Some babies are sensitive or allergic to perfumes, so use natural scents.

### What You Can Do

- **Include baby while preparing food:** let baby smell everything – oranges and lemons, garlic and spinach, cinnamon and cloves.
- **Let baby smell the difference** between dough and freshly cooked tortillas or between other 'raw' and cooked foods. Talk about how food smells differently as it cooks. Taste the difference, too.
- **Talk about the difference between smell and taste** for items like vanilla and cinnamon.
- **Try interesting essential scents** in massage oils when you massage baby.
- **Take time to smell the flowers.** Go outside on a rainy day and smell the rain. Go into a garden on a hot day and smell the warm smells.
- **Visit a park or botanical garden** with a scent garden for people with visual impairments. Let baby touch and smell the plants. Remember to make sure that plants are not poisonous. Little children are quick to put everything into their mouths.
- **Talk about smells** when changing diapers – 'poopy' smells.
- **Bathe baby using scented soaps**, but pay attention to allergies.
- **Play guessing games** with older children, asking them to smell objects with their eyes closed and then identify what they smelled.

**Toys to Make** – remember to supervise babies when they are playing with these toys.

- **Add scents** like peppermint, cinnamon or food extracts such as lemon, almond or vanilla extract to playdough or fingerpaint.
- **Sew small pillows** stuffed with 'smelly' things like cloves, anise seed, lavender, cinnamon. Or, use clean socks and knot them securely so that baby can smell, bite and explore.

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## Intuition and Feelings

Babies have feelings. They like some people right away and some they don't. Some places feel safe to them and some are scary. Some sounds make them happy, others sad. Babies recognize when the important people around them are angry, afraid, sad, happy, excited and they react to those perceptions. Children with certain disabilities often seem to be exceptionally intuitive about what is going on with the world and the people around them. Babies can't talk about or even name these feelings, but we can help them develop their intuitive and emotional life by acknowledging their feelings and helping them acquire vocabulary that is about feelings, ideas and thoughts.

### What You Can Do

- **Talk to baby about everything.** Talk about her likes and dislikes – if she spits out the peas, say, “I guess you didn't like those peas.”
- **Comfort baby by talking about what's happening** – “The shot may hurt some but you'll be ok!”
- **Lay the foundation for babies and toddlers to empathize** with others by saying things like “I'm giving a talk today and I'm very nervous” or “Sam is crying; he must feel sad.” Feelings of empathy begin much earlier than many adults realize.
- **Acknowledge baby's feelings.** If she says, “I don't like it!” don't say, “Oh yes you do.” If he cries, don't tell him there is nothing to cry about. If she's afraid, don't tell her “Don't be scared.” You can say, “I know you're scared of the dog. He's very big and furry. After you've known him for a while, maybe he won't seem so scary.”
- **Talk about facial expressions** and body language when reading picture books with baby. “What kind of face is the man making?” “Do you think the dog is surprised?”
- **Explain the difference between feelings and actions.** “It's okay to be mad, but it's not okay to hit.”
- **Expand baby's ability to think creatively** with nonsensical language play. A paper bag can become a peek-a-boo toy. With an older child, you can talk about silly things like how bananas are different from balloons and how they are the same.
- **Create stories and songs,** the sillier the better. Laugh a lot.

**Toys to Make** – remember to supervise babies when they are playing with these toys.

- **Make a book** of drawings or cut-out pictures of people. Describe them using words like mad, sad, happy.
- **Let older babies help you make a “happy” or a “sad” book.** Cut out or draw appropriate pictures, e.g. a photograph of a situation that makes them happy, sad, mad, etc. and paste photos in the book.

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