

five to thrive

The things you do every day that help your child's growing brain



a supplement for parents of children with disabilities

Your child's brain is amazing...

All day, every day the brain is forming connections, linking brain cells together to carry information about our experiences, our hopes and our dreams. Information also passes from one brain to another: we live in a network of connected brains, and the feelings and intentions of other people help to form connections in our own brains.

So, what happens to your child shapes their brain, and the most important thing that happens to your child is you! You are the centre of their network. Everything you do when you are with your child sparks connections in their brain, turning connections into pathways that the child can use again.

For connections to grow in a child's brain, the child needs to be connected to an adult. So the brain and body, feelings and thoughts of your child have been tuning in to what is happening in your brain and body. This strong bond means that you will also be affected by the changes in the brain and body of your child.

Children with disabilities live with extra challenges. All children need a close brain-and-body link to adults because they cannot always manage or make sense of their own feelings and thoughts. They need an adult to do that for them, an adult who is tuned in to the world of the child. So, living with the sometimes chaotic brain of a child can be chaotic, and living with the brain of a child who faces extra challenges can be very challenging!

They can be confusing	<i>because</i>	they feel confused
They can be frustrating	<i>because</i>	they feel frustrated
They can be infuriating	<i>because</i>	they feel infuriated
They can even be frightening	<i>because</i>	they feel frightened

But remember

They can also be delightful	<i>because</i>	they feel such delight in living
They can be very lovable	<i>because</i>	they love you so much

Your child's body grows better when you give the child good food. Your child's brain grows better when you do five simple things that feed the growing brain:

Respond • **Cuddle** • **Relax** • **Play** • **Talk**



respond

“ My brain is very active, but it still can't work on its own. I need my brain to be linked to the brain of an adult. Adults can manage their thoughts and feelings and behaviour, because they have brains that control their responses. But my brain can't do this yet. I need you to respond to me so that I can learn to manage my own responses.”



suggestions

- If they are able to see, your child will watch the expression on your face and the way you use your hands and your body to know how you are responding to them
- If they are able to hear, they will listen carefully to the sounds you make to see how you are feeling
- They also need chances to sort things out for themselves, to process information, so wait-and-see can sometimes be a good response

cuddle

“ When you are close to me I can pick up your feelings in my body. This helps me to feel safe and protected, and this feeling of safety helps my brain to settle and get things sorted out. And if you feel happy when I am close to you this makes me feel that I am a real person who can make a difference to other people. Then my brain is sorting out what makes me feel safe and happy, and what I can do to make other people feel safe and happy.”



suggestions

- Your child needs physical closeness, and will give you signals about what sort of closeness helps them to feel safe – holding hands, brushing hair, massage, stroking, tickling, or just being close in the same space. If being too close is uncomfortable for your child, then you can let them know that you are keeping them in mind by talking or singing or humming from a distance
- Children love to give as well as receive the comfort of physical closeness and being held in mind

relax

“ My brain is so active and I find things confusing. I often feel frustrated and stressed! I still can't manage stress by myself – if I didn't have you to help me take the stress away it could build up to a point where it started to injure my brain. But because I love and trust you, I am tuned in to you. I need you to get stressed and then to relax, and that helps me to stop being stressed and to relax. And when I relax with you my brain starts to sort out how to do that all by myself.”



suggestions

- Children with disabilities face extra challenges. They are likely to struggle to manage stress, and need to tune in to your brain and body to calm themselves down
- Helping your child to self-regulate can be stressful. You need to be part of a network of adults who can give you the support you need to support your child

play

“ Playing helps me to make sense of the world. I like it when you are playful with me, and when you help me to find ways to play on my own. I take notice of you and learn from you all the time, even when you don't know it. When you play with me it really helps me to think and understand and make sense of my world. ”



suggestions

- Children learn through play. Singing games, counting games, action games, let's pretend games can all help the child to make sense of the world around them
- Play that involves using hands – drawing, cutting, cooking – and play that involves movement – running, balancing, throwing and catching – all helps to develop the way the brain controls the body
- Play that involves the senses – seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling – helps to get the brain working as one organised unit
- Play that involves imagination – dolls, stories, dressing up – helps the child to develop thinking skills and understanding

talk

“ Words, signs, symbols and objects are so important to me because these are what make my brain work together in an organised way. I love it when you take notice of what I am communicating to you. It helps me to feel that I am a real person who matters, and it helps me to build patterns for communicating. I love it when you talk to me, or read to me, or sing to me, or find other ways to communicate with me about my experiences. ”



suggestions

- Communicating with your child using words, symbols, signs and objects helps to shape the way their brain is getting organised.
- Reading and the use of interactive stories e.g. Storysacs, is a part of helping to develop shared experiences on which to build, making it easier for them to continue to learn throughout their lives.
- Songs, poems, rhymes and putting words to actions are great ways to get children interested in having fun with communicating

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about five to thrive

The 'Five to Thrive' resources provide an accessible way to approach daily living with babies and young children, and can help parents and carers to understand the importance of bonding behaviours in promoting healthy brain development.

For more information visit www.fivetothrive.org.uk