

Q&A



early education

DR CATHRINE NEILSEN-HEWETT, A LECTURER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, SYDNEY, ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS ON YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

Q On the birth of our daughter, now seven months, we received a host of cuddly toys. But our daughter shows absolutely no interest in them. Why?

A In much the same way as we prefer one activity over the other, babies vary in their preferences for certain toys, play activities and play partners. While many infants at this age will gravitate towards soft toys and stuffed animals, other babies prefer toys that make noise like bells, music boxes or rattles.

This is typical behaviour. A small percentage of infants are hypersensitive to particular textures, a condition known as "tactile defensiveness". These infants are sensitive to touch sensations and can be overwhelmed by ordinary experiences and activities. Infants may be fearful of touching textured materials or vibrating toys, will avoid messy play and become distressed if their hands, face or feet are dirty. If you think this describes your daughter, then you need to contact your GP and be referred to an occupational therapist, who can work on reducing her hypersensitivity.

More than likely, her behaviour is indicative of a lack of interest or preference for other playthings.

At seven months infants are becoming increasingly interested in the visual and tactile qualities of toys. Find toys that make sounds when you push a button, pull a cord or squeeze a foot. Balls of different sizes, nesting cups or pop-up toys are also great. Let your baby be your guide when deciding what to play, and expose her to a variety of experiences, sing songs, read books, and go for walks in the garden.

Q How important is it for children to attend preschool? I am quite happy for my two kids, 18 months and three, to stay at home until school.

A There really isn't a simple answer to this question. For children between the ages of two-and-a-half and six, preschool can be a great option where your child can benefit from a varied curriculum and social interaction with peers. There is a mountain of evidence that highlights the developmental benefits of quality preschool programs for children's social, emotional and intellectual development. This is particularly the case for young children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

High-quality preschool programs are those that include qualified

early childhood teachers, are child-focused, incorporate a variety of activities such as singing, dancing, arts and craft, and storytelling, and include both indoor and outdoor play activities.

Children in preschool and long day care also have the opportunity to interact and socialise with other children of the same age.

While there are many benefits that preschool has to offer, the time your children spend with you is equally invaluable. Whether you decide to keep your children home or enrol them in a preschool ensure that you provide many opportunities for them to interact with other children of the same age by joining local playgroups, organising play dates, or visiting the local park.

Time for social interaction seems to be particularly important for learning those key social skills your child will need when starting school. Most importantly, having a loving, attentive caregiver, whether that's Mum, Dad or an early childhood teacher, is what is most important.

Q I've read that until the age of three children tend to play more beside each other than with each other. How important is a social life for toddlers?

A Relationships play an important role in fostering skills that are important for intellectual, social and emotional growth. Your baby's first and most important social relationship is with you (their parent), and this forms the blueprint for all other relationships. Your baby becomes social by imitating you, learning how to share, cooperate, negotiate and respond to others.

From a very early age your baby will start to show preferences for particular adults and children, and play with peers emerges slowly throughout the second year. You can support your child's developing friendships by providing opportunities for children to be near one another and spend time together. These important interactions will provide the time and space needed for the important development of more sophisticated and cooperative play experiences. ●

YOU CAN SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO

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