

# A LINE ON LIFE

8/23/98

## Enriching Your Child's Life \*

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Parents want their children to live long, happy, healthy, fulfilling lives. We want them to make the most of their potentials. Although this desire is shared, methods to accomplish this are not. How can we enrich our children's lives?

Child expert Burton White starts with goals for healthy development in the first year of life.

1. Give the child a feeling of being care for and loved.
2. Encourage interest in the outside world.
3. Help the infant develop specific skills.

The first goal relates to **attachment** – building a secure bond between parents and their children. Of course, children need good physical care. Beside that, infants need **contact comfort** – to be held and touched frequently. Parents need to respond to their infant's cries as often as possible.

Some parents think they should let their babies "*cry it out*," because they are afraid of "*spoiling*" their children. Whenever possible, it is best for parents to quickly respond to cries of discomfort. A comforting response makes children feel more secure. It strengthens the emotional bonds with parents.

Spoiling very young infants is nearly impossible. However, as the children become more mobile and independent, there is a risk of being **overindulgent**. After the age of 2, parents can have problems if they do everything and buy everything for the child, no matter what. Some parents make the mistake of giving in to their child's demands against their better judgment. You can indulge your children, but they need firm age-appropriate limits and guidelines for permissible behavior.

The second goal involves promoting activities of babies that interest *them*. By paying close attention to the babies' signals of likes and dislikes, and what holds their attention, these interests can be discovered. Give your baby wider experiences by bringing the child with you as you go about the house. White suggests an infant seat, so the baby can safely have a change of scene, and you can interact with your baby more.

To **encourage exploration**, as the child begins to crawl or walk, it helps to "*child-proof*" your house. This way, you can encourage the child's investigation of the world to help intellectual growth. If a child consistently hears, "*Don't touch that!*" the initiative needed to explore the world can be dulled. Although some limits are needed, not allowing children to manipulate common household objects can be a serious mistake. Likewise, restrictive devices like playpens should not be used for extended periods. Although it is an effort for the parent to supervise the child's wanderings, it will bolster the child's natural curiosity.

If you have several children, you are certainly aware of individual differences among them. Parents need to **respect individual variations**. Within normal ranges, individual differences in maturation are the rule. Developmental norms given by experts are *averages* – they are fine for the **statistical child** (*average child*). However, there is a *wide range of normal variation* around the average. At points in their development, children may be ahead, behind or at the average. Parents need to avoid comparing a child's progress with others – especially in front of the child. Each child is *unique* and should be judged as an individual.

The third goal involves **varied sensory experiences**. Surround the baby with a variety of things to see, hear, taste, smell and touch. This can be done with mobiles over the crib, mirrors, or taking them outside for walks

**Talking to children** also provides stimulation. Caretakers can talk about what is happening, objects the baby is viewing, or parts of the baby's body. Respond orally to the baby's vocalizations other than crying. The more verbal interaction, the faster language and thinking abilities will develop.

**Responsiveness** of parents is important, but toys – balls, blocks, rattles, a spoon and a pie tin, mirrors – can provide responses to the child's actions. However, a \$500 color TV is not responsive to a child. Extensive TV watching does not require much manipulation. On the other hand, as the child becomes more capable, a computer could be a very responsive toy (if you can afford it).

We are *not* advocating **forced teaching** – accelerated learning pushed by adults. Some parents prematurely urge their children to excel in various skills. Prodding children into activities like reading, math, athletic or musical training can bore or hamper them. Flooding the infant with flash cards and exercises is not enriching.

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### **People respond well to challenges that don't seem to be beyond their abilities.**

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To enrich your child's life, first you need to find out what interests the child has. Once that is known, provide experiences that are *slightly* unusual or challenging. If experiences deviate too much from the familiar, they may become frightening or frustrating, leading to withdrawal. (We all are more motivated to respond to challenges that do not seem beyond our capabilities.) This **one-step-ahead strategy** adapts your training to your child's abilities. The child can have fun and learn at the same time.

For more information, read Burton White's *The First Three Years of Life* (Prentice Hall, 1990) or other books on child development. Another option is taking college courses such as **Child Growth and Development** or **Human Development**. The information is available, if you want it.

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\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 119-121.