

Infants and Toddlers: Exploring the Senses with Babies  
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Early Childhood Today, v 19, n4, p26-28. Jan-Feb 2005

Very young children are ready and willing to discover the world through tasting, smelling, hearing, touching, and seeing

NEWBORNS EMERGE INTO AN AWESOME WORLD OF sounds, touches, movements, lights, tastes, and smells. Infants must learn to regulate this overwhelming amount of sensory stimulation. At first, an innate sensory barrier helps the newborn shut down into sleep when there is sensory overload. As that barrier disappears, with the help of sensitive teachers who notice signs of overload, the infant learns to control the amount of sensory input.

### Sight

At birth, a baby has a fairly limited range of visual focus, from 8 to 12 inches, which is just the right distance for nursing or for a diaper change! Vision improves rapidly over the next six months. At first, babies seem to explore areas with the greatest visual contrast, such as black and white mobiles. At one month, babies scan the contrasting areas of a person's face, such as angles, edges of the hairline, and shining eyes. Infants are naturally attracted to human faces. When presented with the choice of looking at a bull's-eye, printed patterns, brightly colored disks, or the human face, they choose the face. Infants a few months old become distressed if a teacher's face is still and not expressive. They fuss and turn away.

### Sound

Auditory functioning is excellent even before birth. A 3-day-old infant can distinguish her mother's voice from that of a stranger--and researchers have discovered that the baby prefers the mother's voice. Infants do startle at loud sounds. When even a few months old, infants are sensitive to an angry voice. They will frown and look upset. They can also differentiate between sounds in all the languages of the world. So, for example, infants in Japan hear the difference between "L" and "R," although this distinction is lost on speaking adults in the Japanese culture. However, by the end of the first year, babies no longer can identify sounds that are not in their native language.

### Taste and Smell

Taste and smell discriminations also seem to be "wired in." Newborn infants will turn away from a strong vinegar smell on a cotton swab. They'll smack their lips at the scent of a ripe banana. Infants pucker their lips at sour tastes and protrude their tongues at bitter tastes. They have twice as many receptors for sweet at the back of the mouth as do adults. A newborn exhibits increased heart rate and sucks more slowly if given a bit of sugar water. Babies love sweet tastes, such as mother's milk!

### Touch

Babies are primed to respond to gentle touch. They wriggle with joy when tenderly touched with long strokes of the palms. They have a greater density of skin receptors in relation to amount of skin surface. Hurtful touch, such as a needle prick on the heel to draw blood to test for PKU, for example, elicits a yowl of pain!

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