

Hey Baby, Let's

Smell The Roses

I Take your baby outdoors—to any place where you can find aromatic flowers, such as lavender, narcissi, and roses—for her first experience with aromatherapy. Hold her close to a fresh, newly opened flower and watch her expression of astonished pleasure as she catches the sweet smell.

“A baby’s sense of smell is amazingly keen,” says Dr. Maria Valdes, a pediatrician and neonatologist in Rochester, Minnesota. “Within their first week of life, they can recognize their mother’s scent. Take advantage of their sensory abilities to see what they like and dislike.”

Be forewarned, though: Not only do roses have thorns, but some plants, such as lilies of the valley, foxgloves, and rhododendrons, contain toxins. So if your baby is at the grabbing stage, hold her hands lightly so she can’t sample the flowers.



Have Some Fun!

Babies enter the world ready to welcome every new experience with curiosity and glee. Here, nine great ways to introduce them to the sights, sounds, and sensations of their surroundings. BY MELANIE HAIKEN

I have a photograph of my elder daughter, Melia (now three), that was taken when she was about four months old. She and my husband are in our backyard, in the early spring, and he is holding her so she can smell the perfume of a newly opened rose. The expression on her face is nothing short of delirious. Whenever I look at that picture, I'm reminded of just how responsive newborns are—how ready to delight in the tiniest of sensations. With my younger daughter, Linnea (now six months old), I find myself even more eager to introduce her to the sensory richness of her world.

These nine activities for young babies (newborn to about six months)—all recommended by experts—are the ones that most appealed to both my daughters. They aren't aimed at teaching any particular skills or lessons—rather, they are just a few of the ways you and your baby can have a wonderful time exploring the world together.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIE PASCHKIS

That Soothing Touch

2 Let your baby roll around naked on cloth diapers or a plush bath towel (if it's a cool day, leave her T-shirt on). Warm a dime-size squirt of vegetable oil by rubbing it between your palms, then



massage it gently into her skin, starting with her feet. Rotate each toe, then use your thumbs to press the soft soles of her feet. Work your way up her legs, squeezing them gently as if you were molding clay. (To get her used to the sensation, do just her feet and legs the first time.)

As a soothing stroke for the chest and tummy, place both hands flat against the center of her body, then spread them to the sides, as if flattening the pages of a book. Keep rubbing for as long as she's enjoying it; stop when she grows restless.

“Young babies are very sensual. They're just learning how much fun their bodies are,” says Dr. Gregory Felch, a pediatrician in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the coauthor of *The Pediatrician's Best Baby Planner*. “Touching them helps them develop a sense of the body as a whole.”

Stroke from the center out, as if opening a book.





Baby blastoff: An infant's impulse to spring off your lap helps develop and strengthen her legs.

Springing Into Action

3 Sit down and stand your baby on your lap, facing either toward you or away from you. Keep your knees together to provide a good platform. Wait until your baby flexes her legs slightly, as if she's trying to propel herself into space, then lift her into the air (of course, you

can enhance the flying sensation with sound effects, such as *wheee* or *zoom*). Repeat each time she bends her legs, so that you're just adding momentum to her own natural springing impulse.

"When babies feel a solid surface under their feet, they love to pull their knees up and really give a strong push away," says Dr. John Bolton, a pediatrician practicing in San Francisco. "Parents may worry that this could make a baby bowlegged, but actually it's perfectly safe. In fact, it strengthens their bones, muscles, and joints in preparation for walking and crawling. Just be sure to support the baby's head with your fingers as you pick her up under the arms."

Life's Little Ups and Downs

4 Lay your baby on her back, propped up slightly on a pillow (this game requires some neck control, so wait until she is about two months old). Sit facing her, and grasp her hands firmly. Gently pull her to a sitting position, letting her head follow her shoulders. She'll probably smile gleefully when she sees the world from this new angle. Gently lower her and repeat as long as she's having fun. My daughters enjoyed this even more if I sang a chorus of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" or "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" (moving each arm in a rowing motion) before lowering them.

"Babies are eager to see the world from new angles,

Reach Out and Touch Something

5 Between two and four months of age, babies are perfecting their swatting technique, and nothing is more intriguing than an unfamiliar object suspended overhead. Put a hook in the ceiling above your baby's crib or over your own bed, and use strong string such as fishing line or dental floss to dangle a rattle, a ball of wool, or a set of plastic measuring spoons just within swiping range—close enough to touch but far enough away that she can't grab hold of it and yank it down.



Plastic spoons make a fine target...

You can also make an impromptu mobile by attaching a coat hanger to the string and then hanging several different objects from the hanger (bend the hook of the hanger into a

closed circle so it can't fall off the string).

Another option: Outdoors, push your baby's stroller under an accommodating bush or tree and attach a string to a branch for a fresh-air version of the game.

Change the objects frequently to keep her intrigued. "Swatting uses the bigger arm muscles rather than the fine muscles of the hand, so babies can manage to swat before they can voluntarily grasp a rattle or a toy," says Bolton. "And batting practice teaches cause and effect. Babies will stare at their hands moving around in front of them as if they are thinking, 'Are these really my hands? Am I really doing this?'"



...and a mobile begs to be swatted.

and they really respond to faces,” says Valdes. “As you pull your baby up, she sees your face from a surprising new perspective and thinks, ‘Hey, this is cool! I want to do this all the time!’”

Mommy’s Disappearing Act

6 Prop your baby in a bouncy seat in the center of a low table or another sturdy piece of furniture, making sure she’s in a stable position where she won’t tip over. Position yourself on one side (with one hand stabilizing the seat) and duck down out of her line of vision. Then slowly raise yourself up and bend over her, making a different face each time you reappear in her line of sight.

Until a baby learns object permanence (the concept that things continue to exist even when she can’t see them, which usually starts to sink in around six months), she’ll forget all about you the moment you’re out of sight, then be surprised and thrilled anew each time you reappear. “Up to the age of five or six months, a baby completely ignores something if you drop it,” says Felch. “Then, all of a sudden, you’ll notice she tries to follow it and see where it went.” At about seven months, babies start to become clingy and upset when you leave them. “Before that, it’s as if you went ‘poof!’ as soon as you were out of sight,” Felch says. “Now they know you’re out there somewhere, and they want you to come back.”

Art With an Edge

7 Collect a few colorful board books or picture books with simple, high-contrast illustrations (ones that have stripes, checks, and polka dots are particularly eye-catching). “Traditional soft pastels are totally boring for babies,” says Bolton. “They’d much rather look at art by Mondrian or Miró—primary colors and hard edges that they can follow with their eyes.” Prop your baby on your lap facing away from you (lean her head back against you if she can’t hold it up herself yet), and position the book 12 to 18 inches from her face, pointing out the pictures and offering a running commentary. Flip the page as soon as she turns away or seems to lose interest. And nothing thrills a baby more than looking at pictures of her peers, so baby magazines and catalogs work great for this activity as well.

Merrily We Roll Along

8 On a warm afternoon, spread a big blanket on a shady patch of soft grass in your yard or a neighborhood park. Remove most or all of her clothing (taking the temperature into consideration), since babies often seem to feel more mobile when they’re au naturel. Lay your baby on her stomach or back. Let her roll herself over (with a

little help if necessary); then roll her over again yourself. Continue in one direction until she’s about to roll off the edge of the blanket—to give her a sense of getting somewhere—then lift her back to the center again. “Very early on, babies delight in their mobility,” says Valdes. “They figure out that there’s a lot going on around them and if they can just move around enough, they’ll get to see something different.”

She Can Dance a Cajun Rhythm

9 Many babies love rhythmic music, especially when they’re cranky at the end of the day. Lay your baby on her stomach across your arm, putting light pressure on her tummy with your hand. Place your other hand on her back to hold her securely, and sashay away. Or, if she prefers being upright, hold her in a seated position facing forward, with one hand under her bottom and the other on her tummy. Zydeco and reggae are big hits with the under-six-months set; nothing soothed my daughters like the chank-a-chank rhythms of the Cajun band Beausoleil. Babies also make great ballroom dance partners: Try a waltz, a mambo, or a Gene Kelly-style soft-shoe. □

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Roll models: Before they can crawl, they have to roll—just the game for a warm day.