Importance of Stimulation for Infant Development

Infants are amazing; their brains are changing at lightning speed and these positive developmental changes are enhanced through infants' interaction with their environment. During this important time, it is essential that the infant be exposed to appropriate levels of stimulation - hence the term infant stimulation. By appropriate levels of stimulation, we mean that the stimulation should not overwhelm the infant or under-engage the infant, and that the stimulation should be oriented at supporting the infant's ongoing development. Infant stimulation is especially critical for infants who are born at high risk due to biological or environmental issues, or those infants with diagnosed disabilities. Stimulation can come in many forms; one type of intervention is reading. Research has consistently supported the importance of reading to children. Reading supports both short-term developmental goals and later school performance. In fact, reading is one of the best things a parent can do for his or her child.

It is never too early to start reading; even infants who are hospitalized due to a difficult birth can benefit from reading. The following information is provided through the Baby Awareness and Support through Interactive Computer Systems (BASICS) program:

- Families should start reading early and continue to use reading within the family routine. Regular reading times can start even while the infant is in the hospital.
- Communication patterns develop very early, even before the child speaks his or her first word. Reading can support the development of good communication patterns.
- Reading has other benefits for the infant as well. Reading can give the infant practice in looking towards the parent's face and as the baby gets older, in finding the reader's voice (locating the source of sound). As the child gets older, reading continues to support vocabulary development, attentions span, following simple requests, interacting with friends and family, and much more.

BASICS gives reading tips and here are just a few:

- The parent's voice is familiar to the baby; thus reading can be a comforting family activity even in the hospital.
- Even chronically ill infants or infants with diagnosed clinical or developmental conditions benefit from reading. Listening to a story can be a soothing activity.
- Don't be afraid to read the same books over and over again to the infant; this repetition will support familiarity and recognition by the infant.
- If the family has to be away from their baby, suggest to them that they read stories into a tape recorder. Hospital staff may then play the tape over and over for the infant.

Reading should not stop with the infant's hospital discharge; reading is a fun activity that should be built into the family's regular routine.

The above material was taken, in part, from Baby Awareness and Support through Interactive Computer Systems (BASICS), a project supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the University of Kentucky.