

Through a Baby's Eyes

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Why is it important to encourage a child's curiosity?

"Because nothing is more fundamental to solid educational development than pure, uncontaminated curiosity."

Behaviors indicating emergence of curiosity are: interest in small particles, voices, sounds, faces, all behaviors of primary caretaker, especially her reactions to him; interest in exploring living area; interest in consequences of his actions; interest in the effects of his actions on objects dropping, banging.

Dr. Burton White says, "We have never come across a healthy 8 month old who is not incredibly curious. We have never known an 8 month old who, once she learned to crawl, needed to be encouraged to explore a home. Bear in mind that a very strong exploratory drive is of central importance to humans. Nothing is more fundamental to solid educational development than pure, uncontaminated curiosity."

White thinks the curiosity has been there but now that the 8-month-old baby can get around it can really be expressed. That baby has been looking at things and wanting to get to them - and now she can. She, in fact, becomes dedicated to physical exploration as soon as she can move her body through space.

"Situations that most adults would find uninteresting often fascinate a baby. Don't be surprised if you find a baby swinging a kitchen cabinet door back and forth several dozen times a day for several consecutive days. Or if she is intrigued by a small piece of dirt he has picked up from the floor. Or if she is fascinated by a cellophane wrapper from a package. She will also be interested in a razor blade or a penny - or anything else she can inspect closely and put into her mouth to explore further. You see that curiosity is a mixed blessing: it is the motivational force underlying most learning and achievement and at the same time it is the cause of many childhood accidents.

This baby wants to see everything, touch everything, and bring everything to his mouth. She'll pretty much explore any area she's allowed access to. She'll explore anything that is sort of small for its novelty and then for what it will do. She'll explore the controls on the TV, VCR etc., etc. She'll fiddle with the doorknob. She'll explore the contents of the kitchen cabinets and pantry - and trash can. She'll be interested in leaves, dirt, the properties of water. Basically, she wants to explore everything.

She not only wants to find out what they are like - she wants to know what she can do with them and what the consequences of her actions will be. You flip that switch and the light comes on. You press that button hard enough and the door bell rings. You throw that toys at your mothers face and she yells at you - that kind of thing. And if the results were interesting, this kid wants to do it again and again."
(White)

"Curiosity is critically important because it is the best motivation to learn all the way through life."

How do you encourage it?

- Make certain that the child has maximum access to the living areas of your home or all areas of the child's classroom in Mother's Day Out or a child care center.
- At home, try to make the kitchen as interesting and as accessible as possible.
- At home or at school, get the child outdoors as much as you can.
- Have available a supply of materials, not ones that he has access to regularly, to stimulate him when he seems bored or at loss for something to do.
- Don't insist she must attend to something-- like flash cards. Try instead to build upon her natural enthusiasm for learning by responding as warmly and as supportively as you can when she gets excited about something. Sometimes it's as simple as making a positive comment. It is not terribly important that you come up with a brilliant observation: the major requirement is that you support and broaden her curiosity.
- When you see a child get interested in something -ducks, construction vehicles, animals, trucks, scooping and pouring, building - build on it. Go watch the ducks at Herman Park, point out the trucks as you drive down the roads, sit a watch the vehicles at a construction sight, buy a couple of bags of bank sand and play in the sand - or save your coffee cans so you can build tall towers. Extend the interests with books and stories. Implicitly, such behavior on your part makes it clear to the child that to be curious, to be learning, to be exploring, is something that you strongly approve of. What you approve of means a great deal to your child, especially at this particular phase of her life.

The average baby spends 20% of her waking hours exploring small objects. What is he doing? What is she learning?

At about 6 to 8 months a baby begins exploring small objects.

They work to find out all they can about the qualities of an object. White says there's a pattern of standard actions: they look at them, feel them, hit them against various surfaces, drop them, throw them, poke them, bend them, click them, squash them, and mouth and chew on them. They put them in things and take them out. If there is a hinge on a toy - or a cabinet door - they swing it back and forth. Educators call all these activities exploratory activities.

Then between 14 months and their second birthday, toddlers add the following activities:

They carry things around - a bunch of them even -- and set them on different surfaces. They line them up. They nest them. They stack things. And they bring them to you. They put them in things they take them out of things. It's not like they are just exploring the characteristics of one object but they are often exploring objects in relation to each other - and in relation to what they will do.

And then they practice their skills on them. We call that mastery experiences. Two of those skills are throwing and dropping; others are swinging hinged things back and forth, opening and closing doors and drawers, standing objects on end and then knocking them over, putting things together and taking them apart, putting objects through openings, putting objects into little holes (like small toys into the VCR opening or letters into a mail slot), scooping and pouring, manipulating simple lock mechanisms, activating switches like lights and remotes and spinning or turning wheels. This toddler is also beginning to get interested in puzzles and how to do them - and they love balls.

This period, from 8 to 24 months, is an incredibly rich time during which the child is acquiring the foundations of higher mental abilities. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the bulk of these acquisitions that underlie later thinking ability come about through thousands of simple explorations of small objects and without the benefit of any special input by other people.

Physical objects and physical surroundings will continue to intrigue a curious toddler - but less and less so as he approaches his second birthday. It's as if he has gradually learned all about them and is ready to check out the rest of the world.

Activities and Mastery Experiences from Dr. Burton White's [The New First Three Years of Life](#)

Living in the Land of the Giants

Proportionally, if you were a toddler. . .

. . . most grown-ups would be 10 to 12 feet tall.

. . . it would be like our walking into a room with ceilings 16 feet high. We might see a dining room table that would be 5 feet tall. And then we'd have to try to get on the seat of a chair that is 3 feet high. Think of trying to get up stairs this high (15") when you can't even reach the handrail because it is 5 ½ feet tall.

From a great book, The World of the Child, by Aline D. Wolf. It's about a daddy who mysteriously enters the world of a child. "I stared at everything around me, hardly believing what I was seeing. The walls were four times as high as I was. The windows were so far above my head that I could only see the sky. Across the room where the giant lady was sitting, there was an unusual collection of legs. The table had six legs that were taller than I was. Each of the four chairs had four legs. The giant lady's legs were angled among the four legs of her chair - and her enormous knees were staring right at me. I couldn't see what was on the table, or what was under the table."

. . . bathrooms would be a challenge. If we could get into the bathroom (door knobs are almost 6 feet high), and if we could somehow get the lights turned on (light switches are like 9 feet tall), -- and we'd find it really hard to get up on the pot at 30 inches high. The sink would be absolutely unusable at 5 ½ feet tall.

"Come into the bathroom with me," the giant lady ordered as she took my wet hand and dragged me down the hall. I did my best to keep up with her but my legs were much too short.

"Now, let's wash your hands," she commanded as we reached the sink. At least I think it was a sink. It was so high that I couldn't peek over the edge of it. She pulled my hands forward as far as they would reach and let some water run over them. She handed me a bar of soap as big as a loaf of bread. My fingers weren't long enough to hold it firmly and it slithered to the floor.

"Look at that," she said crossly. "That's the umpteenth mess you've made today. I'll have to go get the mop." All of a sudden I realized you this giant lady was. She was the custodian here. Her job was to keep everything clean and neat."

. . . and then there are the stairs. Try stepping up stairs with risers 15 inches tall - and trying to hold on to a handrail that is positioned 5 ½ feet above the steps.

So how can we help those little ones living in the land of the giants?

- Allow them to use the coffee table for their books and toys - it's the only low table in the house and the perfect height for their use.
- Let them play in a cabinet - that door is just their size!
- Make sure their silverware, their plates and bowls, their gardening tools, their shovels and buckets are the right size for their little hands.
- Slow down when you walk with a toddler - your stride is more than twice theirs.