

A support guide for parents raising babies and toddlers through the coronavirus crisis

April 6, 2020



By [Annabelle Timsit](#)

Geopolitics reporter

It is a well-established fact that [babies' brains develop](#) at warp speed in the first three years of life, laying critical cognitive, emotional, and social foundations. But what happens when a public health emergency like Covid-19 completely upends this time?

Parents and caregivers of children of any age are having a tough time at the moment, but parents and caregivers of infants and young toddlers have particular concerns: How will social distancing affect my child's development? How do I keep them away from screens, as advised, when they are home all the time and I have to work? How will they develop social skills and gross motor skills if we are all locked inside? And perhaps more than most: how will I get through the day?

First, the good news: There is nothing your child needs that you are not capable of giving them within the four walls of your home. This is when babies [start learning to](#) recognize people and objects, understanding cause and effect, regulating their emotions, and speaking. In short, these are crucial moments—but to take full advantage of them, you don't have to have a PhD in child psychology. [Infants and toddlers need lots of love](#), attention, and stimulation to thrive, and the likeliest place for them to get it is at home with you.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, an expert on child language development, says that this time spent at home won't harm your child's development as long as "they have a secure base, and they know they're loved, and they

know they're safe." The most important thing, she says, is to ensure that your child has a routine, and plenty of self-directed activities they can do throughout the day to give them a sense of agency. "They know something is up, they see and feel it from us. And even if they don't understand it, they get it. So, how do we create a routine? It doesn't have to be strict, but just a schedule of this is what we're going to do today, even if it's running around the living room."

But it's not just about them—you [have to be well](#) in order to care for them well. Depression and loneliness can affect your ability to interact with your baby in the ways they need to feel safe and to take cues from you on how to move, talk, and act.

Many parents worry that their young children will miss out on learning to socialize. But Kai-leé Berke, a former preschool teacher and advisor at [Promise Venture Studio](#), an incubator for early childhood experts to connect with tech and policy, says that's not something parents should worry about. "A young child's most important social interactions and community is their home community, whoever that happens to be." If you really want your child to focus on building relationships, then there are easy things you can do to make sure that still happens under quarantine. "They could do things like draw a picture for their friend, or they could build a block structure and the parent could suggest, *why don't we take a picture of this, and I'll text it to Michaela's mommy so she can show her?*"

This guide draws from knowledge acquired over two years of reporting for [Quartz's Rewiring Childhood](#) project. It is in no way comprehensive, but rather it is a collection of the best resources that have been recommended to us by leading pediatricians, advocates, and developmental experts, all targeted for newborns to three years old.

[As we've said before](#), and we'll say again, the most important piece of advice we can share is to have a bit of self-compassion, and acceptance for you and your kids. No one asked for this, and no one likes it. It's a

tough time for everyone, but especially for those whose kids are young, and by definition, very demanding.

Things to do

The New York Times: Maria Russo, children’s books editor for The New York Times Book Review, has been giving advice to parents for decades on [how to raise a reader](#). She recommends nine books for children between 2 and 4 years old that deal with anxiety and stress. Who knows, maybe reading them to your child will help calm you too. There’s also a great list of [podcasts appropriate for kids ages 2 and up](#).

Quartz: Quartz senior reporter Jenny Anderson recommends 29 books that carry important lessons that will outlast this crisis, like how to be kind, or how to support your siblings. With libraries around the world shutting their doors, you can find many of these books online. If you’re worried about screens, know that it’s okay to expose your toddler to a screen once in a while in order to read to—and with—them. Just remember to ask them questions: “What do you think will happen next?” “Where’s the bunny?” “What sound does a duck make?” (PS: [Video chats with grandparents](#) are also okay.)

Sesame Street: Sesame Street has been making educational content for children for 50 years and research shows it is [in fact, educational](#). Also: kids love it. There’s a trove of resources for caregivers that includes eBooks, [video activities](#) you can do inside your home, and offline games you can print, like coloring pages and a step-by-step guide to hand washing. Also keep an eye out for [a weekly column](#) with tips for parents, written by Rosemarie Truglio, senior vice president for curriculum and content at Sesame Workshop. Here are two of our favorites:

- “Play ‘sink and float’ in the bathtub by testing a variety of bath items: a bar of soap, a rubber ducky, a toy car, a dry sponge, empty and full small plastic travel

bottles, and bath books. Once you discover which items float and which ones sink, place them in two separate containers and then, together, count how many float and how many sink.”

- Make “a simple, sealed jar filled with water and brightly colored glitter. When you shake it, the glitter whirling around the inside of the jar represents how your child is feeling inside. Have her watch the glitter swirl and take deep belly breaths while the glitter slowly drifts to the bottom. When it finally settles, the two of you will be able to see through the clear water, symbolizing that your child has achieved a calmer state and giving you the opportunity to talk about the big feeling she was experiencing.”

Zero To Three: One of the leading advocacy groups for babies and toddlers in the US has a list of seasonal activities you can do with your baby or toddler for every month of the year. Each month has a theme, like texture or animals, that promotes curiosity and the development of language and motor skills. A note: This guide was written pre-pandemic, so some activities won't be adapted to the [CDC's rules on social distancing](#). Zero To Three also has a more generalized [resource guide for parents](#) tied to coronavirus.

Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center: The ECLKC is a part of Head Start, a pre-K program in the US for low-income children and their families. Their handbook has activities parents can do with babies and toddlers outside and in every room of the house. Again, this is pre-coronavirus, so you will have to bypass some sections, like the one about exploring your community. But some areas are definitely not off-limits, like your family's “surprise drawer,” the one “where all the odds and ends are put.” ECLKC recommends turning this drawer into a treasure chest for your child to explore on a rainy day.

Things to learn

Everything you do with infants and toddlers is a learning experience. Reading and singing builds literacy, counting aids early numeracy, and games like head, shoulders knees and toes are all about gross motor skills. Kids love to cook and clean (seriously) as long as you make it age-appropriate (and don't expect anything to actually get clean). Here are some others:

Beanstalk: This website offers live and on-demand classes for children between 1.5 and 6 years old that are personalized based on their age and developmental needs. The teachers are early childhood development experts, and the platform comes recommended by [Promise Venture Studio](#). It's worth scrolling through [their extensive resource guide](#), using the parameters that matter to you and your family, to find more learning platforms for your child.

Easy Peasy: Most experts [don't recommend screen time](#) for children under the age of 2. But while keeping them away from screens as much as possible is still the goal, a little bit of quality screen-based content with your child is okay, as long as you are experiencing it with them. Enter Easy Peasy, [a tried-and-tested mobile platform](#) that provides age-specific learning games for children between zero and five.

Tinkergarten: This free website offers weekly play scenarios that challenge young children to develop their socio-emotional, communication, and motor skills. In one example, parents turn [a cardboard box into a "not-a-box,"](#) a magical opportunity to make the ordinary, extraordinary. Bonus point: Tinkergarten comes with an online community of caregivers in the [#OutdoorsAll4 Facebook Group](#).

Playful Learning Landscapes: Urban designers, psychologists, and developmental experts work under the umbrella of this joint venture, established last year by the Brookings Institution, to make

urban spaces more family-friendly. They've turned [bus stops into playgrounds](#) and [supermarkets into classrooms](#). Now, they are going indoors, and will soon publish recommendations on how to turn your home into a space where your child can exercise, learn, and play. In the meantime, we caught up with Hirsh-Pasek, one of the group's leaders, to ask her for a preview. She had three recommendations:

- “Two-year-olds like to bang and stir and they can help out with cooking. Cooking can be like a chemistry class. Investigate why water bubbles when it gets hot, or how food changes consistency when it's blended or baked.”
- “We all have fort material. Make a fort, then hide inside—do you really become invisible? And why does it get dark in there? And why does it get dark when you come out?”
- “Little kids love to plant indoor gardens. If you happen to have some soil around and you were preparing to plant flowers, plant them inside. Order some seeds, get some of your veggies started inside, and watch them grow. That's biology at work, and it's allowing the kids to really have some agency in all of this.”

Care for caregivers

As Rebecca Parlakian, Zero To Three's senior director of programs, [told Arizona's early childhood agency](#), “taking care of ourselves is the oxygen mask approach, like in a plane, when the flight attendant tells us to put on our own mask before helping others.” Self-care isn't frivolous; it's the only way for you and your child to stay well. With that in mind, here are a few resources that could help, provided there is someone in your home who can take care of your child so that you can have a short break:

Parents Together: This website offers tips on managing babies and toddlers, answers to your questions, and a community of similarly-overwhelmed parents to lean on. You can also join their Facebook group, “[Coronavirus Parents: Parenting in a Pandemic](#),” which already has more than 35,000 members.

Sesame Street: Your favorite muppets have some advice for you too. Here’s one: “Get a nice big glass of water and find a comfy spot to sit. Let your child know, ‘I’m just going to sit and (read/think/breathe) while I drink this glass of water.’ Explain that you’ll be available once the glass is empty. Children have difficulty keeping track of time—this is a concrete way to help them understand that you are taking a few minutes to yourself.”

The New York Times: This list is updated weekly and will give you dozens of options for things to watch, listen to, cook, and read.

Culture time: If you are into art, you can also take a virtual tour of [12 world-famous museums](#), from the British Museum in London to the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. If you like music, you can listen to one of the dozens of live virtual concerts [that NPR is compiling here](#).

Headspace or Stop, Breathe, & Think: These two apps are great choices even if you are new to mindfulness and meditation. They both have large libraries full of free meditations, sleep, and movement exercises. Stop, Breathe & Think has the added value of offering lessons tailored to specific emotions you may be feeling that day (and let’s face it, you’re probably feeling *all* of them). [Try the one on gratitude and see how you like it](#). And if you’d like to meditate with your family, [consider Inner Explorer](#).

Learn about your child

Harvard Center on the Developing Child: This video will teach you how you can help build your baby’s brain by engaging in what

scientists call “serve-and-return” interactions—where, like in tennis, your child “serves” up an emotion, through a babble or a gesture, and you, their caregiver, “returns” it with a look, a reaction, or gesture of affection.

Vroom: This free app or text-based platform is funded by the Bezos Family Foundation and will give you science-based prompts so you can help build your baby’s brain and increase your interactions with them so they can learn from you.

Ready4K: If your toddler was attending a childcare program before this pandemic, their childcare provider may be eligible for a free text-based program run by Ready4K that will send you weekly facts about your child’s development and prompts for what you can do to promote it.

Netflix: The 6-episode series *Babies* dives into how babies learn to sleep, eat, crawl, speak, walk, and love. It’s a highly-digestible show, full of interviews with some of the leading developmental experts, and examples of real families figuring things out.

Promise Venture Studio: In a series of very short videos, Berke will teach you her tips and tricks for guiding children’s behavior at home, from setting rules to picking your battles. Berke also runs a parallel blog dedicated to caregivers in this pandemic. Read her inaugural post, [“Everything I Learned About Surviving a Pandemic, I Learned as a Preschool Teacher.”](#)

Patricia Kuhl’s TED Talk: Kuhl, an [influential researcher](#) on speech and hearing in early childhood at the University of Washington, explains in this popular TED Talk how infants learn language, and what that shows us about the social nature of human learning. Bonus: It’s only 10 minutes long.

Books! If you have the time to read books right now—well, first, please tell us your secret. But second, below are books that will teach

you everything you need to know about how infants learn and what you can do to help.

- [“The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells us about the Relationship Between Parents and Children,”](#) by Alison Gopnik (or Quartz’s summary of it).
- [“How Babies Talk: The Magic and Mystery of Language in the First Three Years of Life,”](#) by Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek.
- [“How Toddlers Thrive: What Parents Can Do Today for Children Ages 2-5 to Plant the Seeds of Lifelong Success,”](#) by Tovah Klein.

Read more from our series on [Rewiring Childhood](#). This reporting is part of a series supported by a grant from the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The author’s views are not necessarily those of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.