

Make the most of prime brain development years

BY MIRIAM RUSHFINN

My son is now 15, but I distinctly remember one morning when he was 2.

I had just finished changing his diaper, saying, "OK, you can get up, you're free." He looked at me in anger, "No, no, I'm not."

That's odd, I thought. "Yes, you can. You can get up now, you're free."

More furious now, he glared at me and said defiantly, "No, I'm not, I'm 2."

What I didn't know then was that a majority of my son's language development was being formed by the time he was "free," or 3.

According to the National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders, the most intensive period of speech and language development is during the first three years.

Almost 80 percent of a child's brain develops by the time a child is 5 years old, and a baby's brain is 2½ times more active than an adult brain.

In fact, the more we stimulate the brain, the more it grows.

Noted researchers, such as Rima Shore, who wrote "Rethinking the Brain," confirm that positive experiences and parent nurturing can strengthen healthy neural connections and promote learning.

Vital Signs

Encourage young minds

The Zero to Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families shares these pointers to stimulate early learning:

- To further language and communication: Observe how your baby communicates, repeat sounds and words, read, sing and tell stories. Talk about what you do together during daily activities.

- To further thinking skills: Encourage your child to explore and support your child's own interests. Ask questions to stimulate thinking.

- To further self-control: Use words to help your child understand feelings. Give choices to older toddlers and stay calm when your child is upset.

- To further self-confidence: Comment on what your child does well, help your child be a good problem-solver, give your child a chance to do things for herself and encourage your child to keep trying.

Nationwide, we see an increased focus on quality early learning and care experiences — whether in the home, at preschool or with home care providers.

Locally, Charlottesville and Albemarle have a history of coordinated services and resources for young children and families through the Charlottesville/Albemarle Partnership for Children, a collaborative of 15 community organizations and the local school systems.

In 2007, PFC received a two-year school readiness and early learning and care grant, called Smart Beginnings, from the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation.

Smart Beginnings initiatives are comprehensive public-private approaches focused on our community as a place where children grow up healthy and arrive at school prepared to succeed.

Smart Beginnings offers a variety of services for families and child-care providers:

- Early developmental screenings available through the Infant Development Project.

A developmental screening and report looks at a child's unique learning environment, incorporates parent feedback and assesses his or her motor, communi-

cation, problem-solving, social-emotional, self-help and behavioral skill areas. The report also provides recommendations, with suggested activities and services that might help and assist parents improve school readiness.

- Guidance for parents on local quality child care providers through the Seal of Quality Child Care, managed by Children, Youth and Family Services.

This free program for child-care providers supports, strengthens and promotes quality early care and learning environments.

- Parenting information and community resources online and at Smart Beginnings information kiosks throughout town (at the Jefferson-Madison Regional Library downtown branch, Charlottesville/Albemarle Health Department and Johnson Elementary School).

- Family support for Johnson preschool families and for Latino parents with young children living in Albemarle County.

THE WRITER

Miriam Rushfynn is Smart Beginnings coordinator for the United Way-Thomas Jefferson Area.

THE COLUMN

Vital Signs is a community health promotion column sponsored by Martha

Jefferson Hospital, Southern Health, Thomas Jefferson Health District and the University of Virginia Health System.