



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Can I Help My Baby Remember?

We usually think of babies as having short memories. People say, “Don’t worry — she’s young, she’ll forget all about it.” But will she? Every day we learn more about what infants remember and about how memories change over the first years of life. We also are beginning to understand what shapes memory in infancy and beyond.

Early Development in Memory

If we want to find out what adults remember, we ask them and they tell us. Since infants can’t tell us what they remember, researchers ask them to show us. How? — by imitation. For example, a researcher might put a ball in a cup, cover it with another cup, and shake it to make a rattle. Because infants can only imitate these activities if they remember them, imitation is a way to study memory.

By watching babies “rattle around,” researchers have found that infants learn and remember and that their memories change dramatically over the first two years of life. For example, as they get older, infants remember not only the steps of activities (for example, shaking the rattle), but also their order (as in the example above, putting the ball in the cup before shaking). They also learn more quickly. A six-month-old may need to see you put together the rattle many times before remembering the steps. By the second year, infants need to see you put together the rattle only one or two times before they too can make the rattle. Another change in the early years is how long memory lasts. Six-month-olds remember for hours but not days or weeks. By the second year, infants remember for weeks and even months.

Changes in Memory Relate to Changes in the Brain

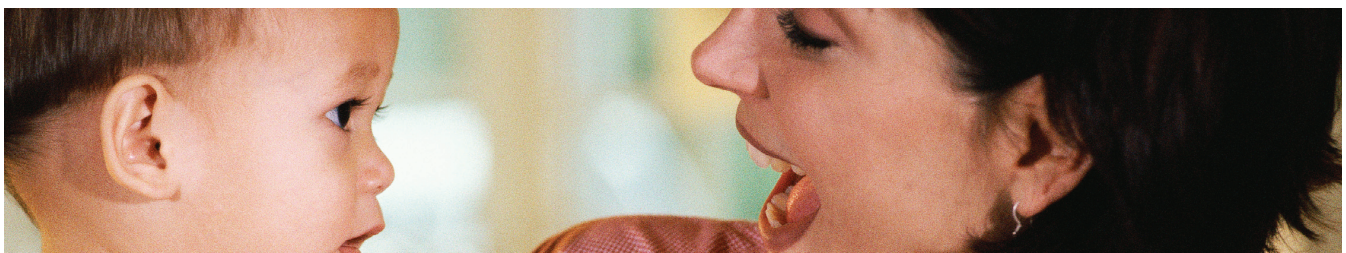
How can we explain the rapid changes in memory in the first years of life? One of the things that effects memory development is brain development. For adults, remembering where we left our car keys (and even where we parked our car!) depends on the cooperative work of many parts of the brain. In infants, some parts of the brain involved in the memory network develop very early. In fact, those parts of the brain are working at adult levels as early as six months of age. Other parts of the network develop later. They make their most rapid and important changes late in the first year and during the second year of life. It is no coincidence that over this same period, infants become better able to form memories and retain their memories longer.

Changes in Memory Relate to Activities You Do Together

Brains don’t develop in a social vacuum and neither does memory. Even before babies can talk, the people who care for them and talk to them about ongoing activities and past experiences shape their memories.

To help your child understand events:

- Describe the activities you are doing, even if it is just sorting the laundry!
- Involve your infant or child by asking questions and talking about parts of experiences that interest them.



- Relate events to other things your child already knows. For example, explain that a car wash is like your child's own bath.

Importantly, better understanding leads to better remembering. And when past events come up in conversation, you can further aid remembering by sharing details of the experience:

- **Who** was there?
- **What** was being done?
- **Why** were they doing it?
- **When** did the event happen?
- **Where** did the event happen?

This not only helps children remember, but also guides them in learning how to talk about the past on their own. Of course, with infants and younger children, you will do most of the talking. But as language and memory skills develop, children become more active conversational partners.

Early Memory Relates to Later Memory

By the preschool years, children who actively participate in early memory conversations become talented tellers of their own tales. They have more to say and weave a better story along the way. They also no longer just respond to "do you remember?" questions that you ask, but begin to turn the tables and ask "remember when?" questions of their own. These early memory activities are the training ground for the memory skills that children need to succeed in school and beyond.

By Patricia J. Bauer, Ph.D., Melissa M. Burch, Ph.D., and Mari Strand Cary, Ph.D., Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

For More Information

For more information on memory development, see:
www.sesameworkshop.org/parents/advice/article.php?contentId=63460
www.memory-key.com/ParentsCorner.htm
www.exploratorium.edu/memory

Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

University of Minnesota
Center for Early Education and Development
1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425
St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108

Copyright © 2009 by Center for Early Education and Development

These materials may be freely reproduced for education/training or related activities. There is no requirement to obtain special permission for such uses. We do, however, ask that the following citation appear on all reproductions:

Reprinted with permission of the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED), College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108; phone: 612-625-3058; fax: 612-625-2093; e-mail: ceed@umn.edu; web site: <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>.

**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

The "Question About Kids" series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.