

Everyday education

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When Celia Chang Takahashi plays peek-a-boo with her 1-year-old daughter Connor, it isn't just to hear Connor's infectious little laugh or see her heart-melting smile.

Takahashi knows the simple game can also serve as a learning tool for her baby, helping to build Connor's language and thinking skills.

"You don't have to spend a lot of money on your kids and buy all the fancy-shmancy (educational) toys," said Takahashi, 34, of 'Ewa Beach. "This is stuff you can do with a blanket or a paper plate at home, while you're doing laundry or taking them for a walk to the park."

The Takahashis are among Island families who have taken advantage of Born Learning, a national parent empowerment campaign brought to Hawai'i by Aloha United Way. The program, which offers free parenting and educational materials (see tips, Page D8), is geared toward helping parents and caregivers create everyday learning moments — from singing songs to having simple conversations — for their youngsters from birth to age 5.

"Our goals are to put into the hands of every parent and childcare giver in Hawai'i information they need to become better parents, better first teachers," said Norm Baker, vice president of community building at Aloha United Way.

Since its June 1 launch statewide, about 150 families have called United Way to request free Born Learning materials. Officials hope nationwide ads and word of mouth will increase interest in the campaign, not just among families, but among early childhood educators, obstetricians, pediatricians and business people, as well.

"We really ... applaud (Aloha United Way's) interest in increasing the community awareness about the long-term benefits of preparing children for school," said Liz Chun, executive director of Good Beginnings Alliance. "And really, that begins with giving parents and others information about what they can do with their children."

Studies have shown that 80 percent of a child's brain development occurs by age 3, and 90 percent occurs by age 5, Baker said.

Investing in a child's success early on is critical, experts say.



Celia Takahashi points out birds chirping to her daughter, Connor, as they take a walk.
Photos by Rebecca Breyer
The Honolulu Advertiser



Celia Takahashi of 'Ewa Beach plays peek-a-boo with Connor, 1, a fun game that also has educational benefits.

Research shows the tangible results — adults with greater success in life, fewer involvements in crime, high incomes and higher education levels. Yet nearly 50 percent of kindergartners nationwide come to school unprepared, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

"So all the research shows that if we can help children prepare to learn and they actually walk into kindergarten ready to learn, that we could avoid a lot of the costs that society is paying right now," Baker said. These are costs incurred by the educational system for special-needs children, or the criminal justice and social welfare systems for students who drop out of school and lose engagement with society.

LEARNING MOMENTS

The Born Learning program offers parents and caregivers a wealth of information, including meal ideas for young children, popular games and songs, tips on sleeping practices, guidance on choosing quality toys, information on discipline and health, and tips to help parents understand what to expect during each developmental stage.

The materials place an extra emphasis on easy and fun ways parents can turn everyday moments — going for walks, shopping for groceries or preparing dinner together — into early learning moments.

"The thing that we liked about the Born Learning materials is that it's very easy to read, very easy to digest," said Takahashi, the 'Ewa Beach mother.

On the Born Learning Web site, for example, parents are encouraged to name foods they are eating and talk about foods their children love to eat during meals, or to ask their preschooler to make up stories about his or her stuffed animals and the events of the day at bedtime.

Such basic activities improve socialization, language and thinking skills among infants and toddlers.

Based on the pamphlets Takahashi and her husband Nathan have received, the couple puts toys away with their daughter while counting aloud, names vegetables while putting groceries away and identifies colors when doing laundry.

"She responds and she enjoys it," said Celia Takahashi, who's also a program manager at Good Beginnings Alliance.

PARENTING TIPS

For more tips on early education, call 211 or visit www.bornlearning.org to request free booklets for parents.

Build a foundation You can make sure you give your child the best possible start in life just by following these simple guidelines, courtesy of the Born Learning campaign:

- Take care of yourself so you can care for your child. Becoming a parent can be overwhelming. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Provide a warm and loving environment. Helping your child feel safe is the key to encouraging healthy growth and development. Make sure you give the child a lot of affection.
- Talk, sing and read to your child. The young brain is especially interested in sounds — the building blocks of speech and language. You can form a deep emotional connection with your child just by talking to him or her.
- Create a predictable world for your child. Providing routines teaches children that you and the world around them are trustworthy. If they understand this, they will spend less energy fussing over their needs and more time learning.
- Understand and respond to your child's needs. You cannot spoil an infant, so go to him when he fusses or cries. By responding to your child, you teach him that you care and that he can trust you to read his signals. **Know the stages** Depending on which stage children are in, their developmental needs differ. Remember:
 - Infants need love and attention to learn and to trust. Interact with your baby while tending to his physical needs, and help him learn about his environment by giving him things to touch, taste, smell, hear and see.
 - Young toddlers are beginning to explore the world on their own and act independently, so provide time and safe space to dance, read board books and work on feeding and dressing.
 - Older toddlers like to observe and imitate. Let them string beads, count objects, play matching games, color, paint and do dramatic play. Provide choices and set limits to help toddlers with impulse control.

Source: Born Learning

Nathan Takahashi, 36, an elementary school teacher, especially likes the dad-devoted sections that include ways fathers can get involved, such as creating a "father time," be it every day or every Saturday, when a child knows he or she can sit down with dad and listen to stories, or going grocery shopping together — taking a list along and asking the child to help find the items throughout the store.

"What's nice about that is it's geared toward everybody, not just moms," he said.

The ideas offered by the Born Learning program are concrete, practical and easy for parents to use every day, Chun said. "As a parent, you are your child's first teacher and you need to take that role seriously," she said.



Celia and Nathan Takahashi take a stroll with Connor in the neighborhood, as they point out birds and the different colors of cars.