 **Being Born Early May Mean More Than You Think . . .** footprnt

A baby in an intensive care nursery lives in a very unnatural environment. This environment is very different than the warm, dark, quiet environment of a mother’s womb. Tiny bodies work hard to stay alive, remain healthy, and grow. Babies born early are bombarded with sights, sounds, smells and activities that their senses are not yet designed to handle. This can cause a baby’s sensory systems to develop more slowly or to develop differently than they would typically develop. Since no two babies are alike, there is no way to predict whether or how much these experiences may affect individual babies.

This chart provides an overview of sensory development and some of the effects that being born early could have. Having your baby checked helps you know things are OK or provides support if your baby needs help. **These services are usually free.**

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| **Sensory System** | **What it Does** | **What Might Happen** |
| **TACTILE**  (Touch) | Communicates pleasure and pain  Helps babies identify and recognize objects  Helps babies explore their world | This system is well developed even in very premature babies, so the entire body is very sensitive. Some babies become oversensitive to being touched as a result of all the handling and touching involved with their hospital stay. |
| **VESTIBULAR** (Balance  and Motion) | Helps babies keep their balance and be ready  to learn to sit, crawl and walk  Helps babies know where they are in space | Increased early stimulation to this system can sometimes cause babies to be extra fussy or have difficulty settling down. It may also cause toddlers to move in unusual ways or respond in unusual ways to different types of movement. (swinging, climbing, |
| **GUSTATORY** (Taste) | Encourages babies to explore their environment  Helps later learning skills, such as eating  and playing with toys | Exploring things by mouth is part of typical infant development and babies who have negative experiences may be less interested in doing this, which can affect their overall development. |
| **OLFACTORY** (Smell) | One of the most well-developed senses in  newborn babies  Helps with recognition and discovery  Plays an important role in feeding | Babies demonstrate positive and negative reactions to certain smells very early. Early exposure to strong smells causes negative memories. Triggering these memories may cause negative reactions, even into adulthood. |
| **AUDITORY** (Hearing) | Important for attention and learning  Helps babies know about what’s going on around  them and anticipate certain events  Is basic to the development of spoken language | Babies exposed to high noise levels may find it difficult to filter out background noises and pay attention to what’s important. This may cause sleeping or attention problems in some children. Hearing problems may also exist. |
| **VISUAL**  (Sight) | Most complex of all the sensory systems  Continues to develop for 3-4 months,  (even in full-term babies)  Has a strong connection to the system of touch  Works with the vestibular system to help  babies maintain their balance  Very important for all kinds of learning | Babies born early are at risk for vision problems. These problems may come from damage to their underdeveloped eyes or from certain conditions that affect premature babies. Some may not be detected until later when a child appears clumsy, is afraid of certain activities or has trouble playing with toys that require a lot of concentration. |

**If you have any questions about your baby’s development, there are a variety of people and organizations that can help. Please contact one of them. Your baby will thank you.**

**Contact the North Carolina Deaf-Blind Project (NCDBP)**

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