

## SOME OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST EXPLORERS AND SCIENTISTS WEAR NAPPIES!



Picture this: Thirteen months old Mathew is sitting in his high chair. His dad puts a cup of juice on the tray. He clutches the handle of the cup with his right fist, extends his arm and hand carefully over the side of the high chair, strains his body to lean over as far as the restraint will allow him, and with the serious and studied look of someone doing a task of great significance, tips the cup and watches with interest as a stream of liquid cascades to the floor and bounces around the tiles. His gaze still fixed, his mouth fixed in attention, he repeats the tipping action, this time causing all the remaining juice to pour onto the floor in a great rush. The sound of the juice hitting the floor causes his dad, who is preparing tea for the family, to glance over at Mathew and speak. So hard was he concentrating on his pouring that Mathew startles when his dad speaks.

So how does his dad respond to Mathew?

- One response is to speak sternly to him, remove the cup, encourage him to eat his lunch and remind himself to give Mathew a trainer cup with a lid next time so that there is not so much mess. This is by far not the worst possible response to this situation. It is certainly preferable to accusing him of being naughty, but it does miss the point a bit about why Mathew is doing what he is doing.
- Another possible response comes from recognising that although Mathew has made a mess and wasted his juice, he has actually been carrying out his own physics experiment, exploring gravity and the properties of liquids. He is asking himself the question “What happens if....? As young children do, he asks the question in his behaviour and tries to find out the answer. The serious way in which he approached the experiment indicates that he is “thinking through doing”, engaging with the physical world and trying to figure out how things work. The importance of such experiments does not mean that a “good parent” must accept living in a very messy physics laboratory. It does help however, to appreciate that this is the work of one to two year olds and to understand that the baby is not doing it to deliberately make life hard for adults.

It helps when adults see babies’ behaviour as telling them something about what they are interested in and what they need to do. The adult can then figure out acceptable ways to let the baby do what he or she wants to do. In other words, it helps both the child and the adult when parents think about the meaning of things for the child, rather than just seeing them from their own perspective.

This incident might remind Mathew’s dad him to do at least two things:

- Put a bath towel under Mathew’s high chair.
- Provide opportunities for him to pour, tip, and empty containers.

There is much greater appreciation now, of the importance of the first months and years of life in laying the foundation for all development and learning. However, some people still have the idea that babies are less interesting than older children, or that it’s more fun to be with an older child whose learning is more obvious. Often the reasons for these views have to do with adults’ lack of appreciation for what is really going on with babies. Some of the many significant developmental achievements that occur in the first year or year and a half of life are dramatic and obvious to just about anyone who watches a baby. Smiling and laughing, reaching, sitting, crawling, cruising, and walking are good examples. On the other hand, many important achievements are subtle, not noticed by those who do not know to look for them. If an adult does not know what to look for, many of the important efforts of babies to explore and figure out how the world works just look like “messing around”. It makes the experience of living with or caring for a baby much better for the child’s development and learning, and more interesting for the adult, when the adult knows what to look for and appreciates the meaning of babies’ play and exploration.

Babies are tireless in their efforts to find out about the world around them.