

The benefits of BabyGym

Karen Nel

I discovered BabyGym thanks to my sister-in-law, Nicolle, who convinced me to join her for the classes. I'd heard of BabyGym before, but due to a combination of ignorance and prejudice, I'd decided it probably wasn't my cup of tea. I honestly thought it was like gym for babies – in other words, that we'd be doing baby push-ups and sit-ups on rubber mats on the floor. While there is a little of that involved in the BabyGym programme, it's the brain developmental techniques and stimulation of baby's senses that really blew me away. We tend to think that babies should be kept in a cocoon and sheltered from any external stimuli, but I soon discovered that they relish all kinds of stimulation. They'll smile and gurgle when they get to lick a piece of fruit for the first time, and wrinkle up their noses in disgust when they smell something they don't like. Rub a cold spoon over the bottom of their foot and their toes will quickly curl up, accompanied by a look of utter surprise on their expressive faces.

Nicolle and I signed up for five weeks of BabyGym classes. Week 1 was dedicated to massage. It may sound like a bizarre concept to massage a baby, but I found that my son really enjoyed it. He loved the closeness and the hands-on attention that he received during each session. He didn't always lie still for the whole session, but he gurgled contentedly and watched what I was doing with great interest. Charlotte, our BabyGym instructor, explained that one of the purposes of baby massage is to make your child aware of their body parts and what they are capable of. The baby spends months curled up in a foetal position in the womb, and it's a big adjustment for them to realise that they can stretch their backs out straight, bring their hands together and touch their feet.

Week 2 focuses on balance and movement. The babies got the chance to swing, roll over gym balls and be pulled around in laundry basket "cars". The little ones loved it and the moms got a pretty good workout doing it too. During week 3 and 4 I watched my little boy discover new tastes and smells and turn his head to locate sights and sounds. Watching your child discover something for the first time makes you feel like you're experiencing it for the very first time – the magic of soap bubbles, the visual delight of multi-colored ribbons and the soft sensation of cotton wool against your skin.

Week 5 is really a special experience. After they had mastered some new grasping, rolling and hip movement techniques, the babies got dressed in full graduation regalia, complete with gowns and mortarboards, for their BabyGym graduation. Besides the extreme cute factor of such little people in graduation gear, it's special for the moms too because you realise how much you have discovered about your child in the weeks that have passed, and how important it is to keep investing time in their development.

I'd like to say a very big thank you to our instructor, Charlotte Gouws, for making each class so very special. I'd really recommend this experience to other moms, even if it's not your first baby. I did BabyGym for the first time with my second child and was so glad to have discovered it. Charlotte also gave us lots of tips for older children, which I have put into practice with my older daughter with great success.

