

Fascinate your baby!

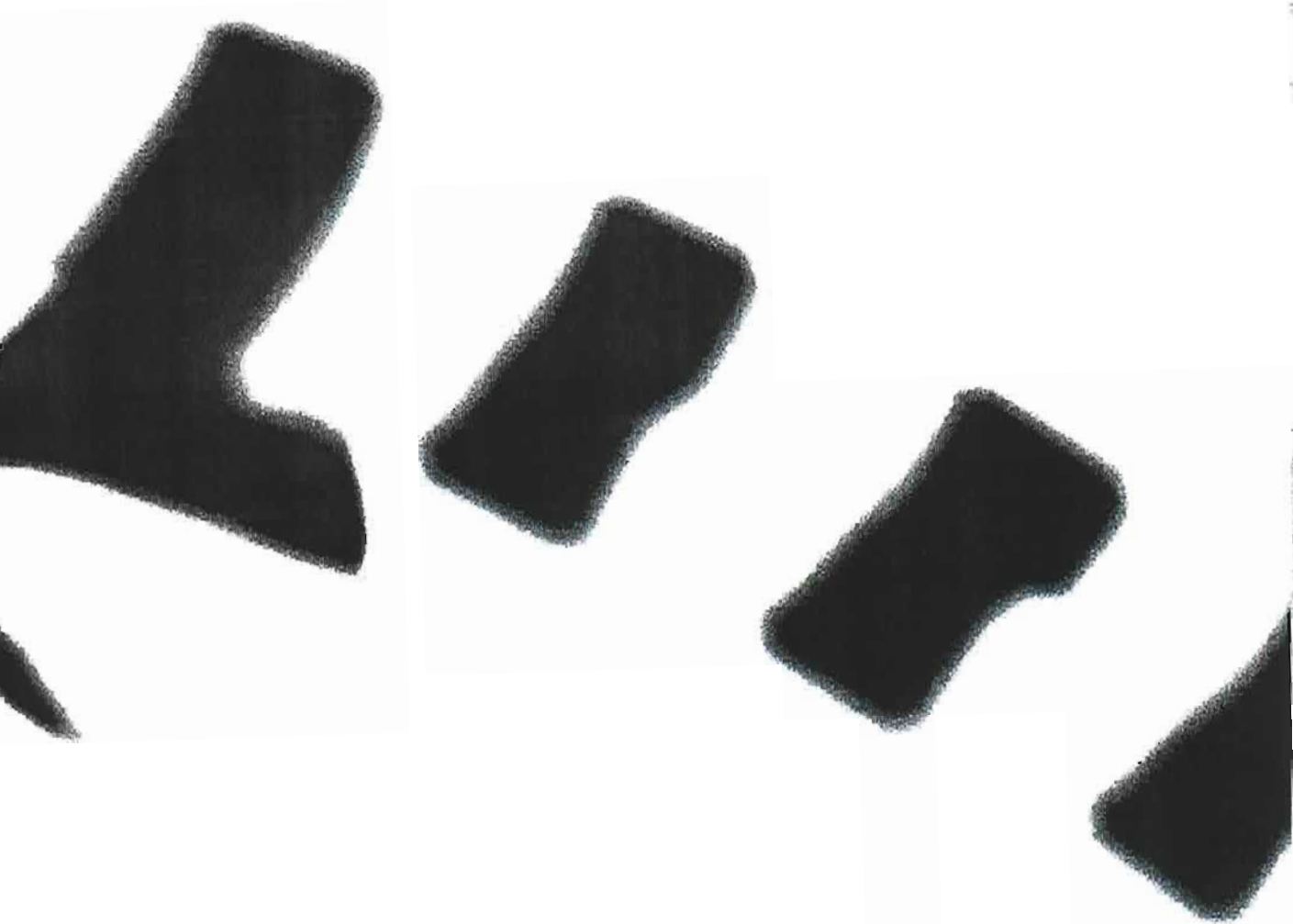
What she really loves—and why

by Paula Spencer

Photographs by Frank Heckers



He only has eyes
for hues (of bold
colors next to
bright whites)



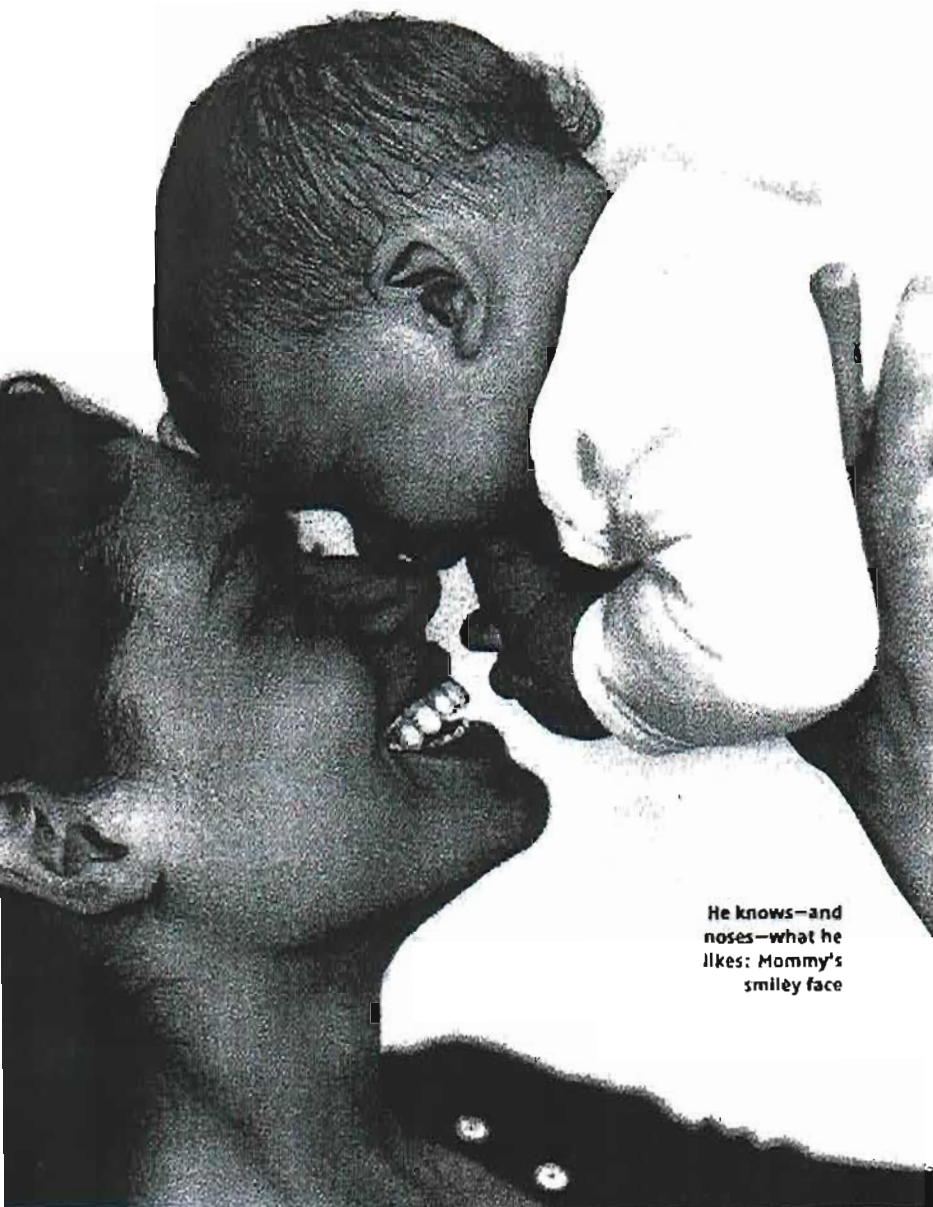
When my son Henry was 5 months old, his two favorite toys were Mr. Bun and Diver Man. Mr. Bun was a simple bunny puppet with a head and two arms. When you scrunched your hand into a fist and then popped it open again, it was like Mr. Bun was playing peekaboo. Rattles in his rabbit ears added a jingle of excitement. Diver Man was the black-and-white image of a face on a picture board. (Diver Man's head appeared to be inside a scuba bubble.) The board also featured, in similar bold black lines, the shapes of waves, a fish, and a boat. On the reverse side was an unbreakable mirror.

Mr. Bun and Diver Man made Henry so darn happy—unlike, say, the adorable wooden robot and the National Zoo's worth of stuffed animals that went ignored. Which brings me to this: How's a new mom supposed to know which of the zillions of toys and other playthings will make her baby smile or laugh, and maybe even stimulate his brain?

While I was focusing on the aesthetics (in short, is it cute?), Henry had other criteria—the same innate preferences that his newborn peers had, that all babies have. Some of these explain why little kids are often drawn to things their parents find annoying, tacky, or both—the subhuman-looking



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He knows—and noses—what he likes: Mommy's smiley face

doll with the alien-size black eyes or the psychedelic spinning top that buzzes ad nauseam. Here's what's known to turn a young baby's head:

High contrast

What's the attraction? A newborn's ability to distinguish among different

shades of color isn't as keen as an older baby's, says Amy Needham, Ph.D., director of the Infant Perception Laboratory at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. Children aren't born color-blind (as was once thought), but it's hard for a 2-month-old to distinguish between, say, pastel sea-green and vivid kelly. Side by side, black, or a bold shade of any color, and white provide the most extreme contrast. That's why objects in these combinations are more visually interesting. (Aha! Both Mr. Bun and Diver Man were black and white, though Mr. Bun did have a touch of pink in his inner ears.)

By 3 or 4 months, infants can see the colors that an adult can, but don't expect yours to fall in love with that sweet lavender teddy bear: Babies are drawn to brighter hues for the same reason they catch our eye: They simply stand out.

Whatever the hue, patterns with thick stripes or blocks of color also hold more visual appeal than solids or tiny patterns—the contrast is more obvious. **Good playtime choices:** Look for toys that are mostly black and white for infants up

“My baby loved... a musical wooden steam engine that played 'Jingle Bells' as it rolled along.”

—Gina Grant
Assistant Managing Editor

My baby loved...his grandpa's mustache. Not only did it make him coo, he also loved to give it a yank.

—Steph Payne, New York City

Cradle attractions

“ My baby loved... watching his big brother balance Beanie Babies on his head, then letting them fall. ”

—Haywood Moxley, Nashville

to 4 months old. Many mobiles, play mats, and infant gyms with small dangling toys, all targeted to this age group, come in such colors. Since your baby's apt to lie with her face pointed in one direction, usually to the right, she'll be able to see a high-contrast baby bumper or a mobile attached to the crib rails on that side most easily. After 4 months, she'll enjoy any colorful contrasts. This is a great age to introduce her to board books with large, simple pictures drawn in bold lines and with lots of bright colors.

Familiar faces

What's the attraction? Well, your newborn's not exactly gazing lovingly into your eyes: He's more likely fixed on the way your glasses show up against the tint of your skin—there's that contrast thing again. But once your baby's vision improves—around 2 months—he'll not only be able to focus on your facial features, he'll also quickly come to prefer them to most other images. (The “social smile” that first shows up at 6 to 8 weeks is happy proof of this.)

Besides the recognition factor, “real faces contain specific elements that attract babies' attention,” says Needham. “They prefer curved lines rather than straight ones and features that are

arranged symmetrically.” The orderly arrangement of two eyes evenly spaced above a nose and then a mouth, all on a round face, clearly fits the bill.

Good playtime choices: Get within 8 to 12 inches of your newborn's face as you talk to him. Raise your eyebrows and give a big smile to make your mug more interesting. By 5 or 6 months, he'll enjoy board books with simple pictures of faces, including photos or large drawings of baby faces. At 6 to 9 months, some infants become attached to loveys, often a special doll or stuffed animal that has a face. So it's not too soon to make small baby dolls or toys with faces available, even though an infant will mostly poke the eyes and

Go wild!

Open out the sides of this zebra-framed mirror and it turns into a tune-carrying green 'gator. **Jungle Pal Music Mirror** is \$15 from Fisher-Price.

Let the story unfold

On one side, each “page” of **Tiny Love's Double-Sided First Book** is black, white, red, and blue; flip the book over for a more colorful read. \$12

Wings of love

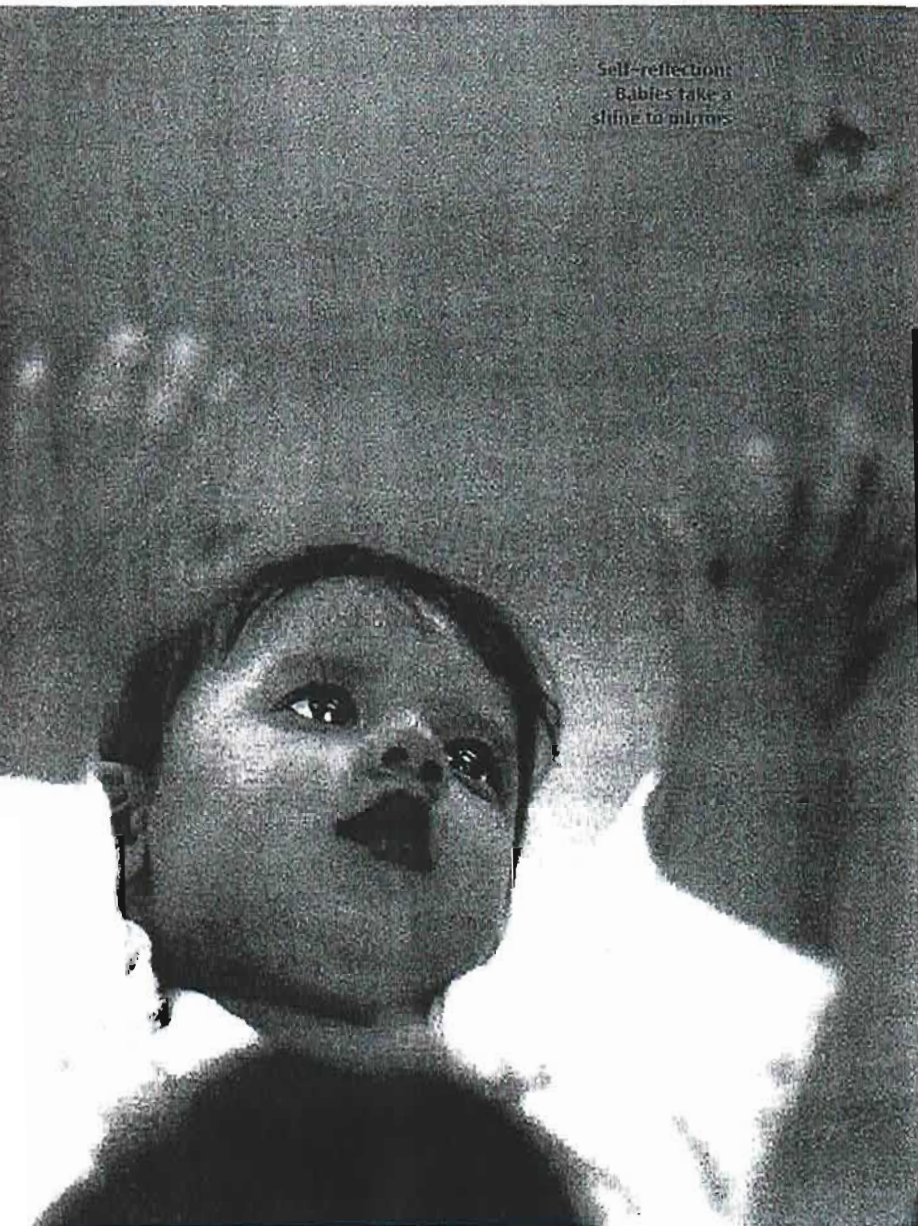
Shake it up with these flying pals from **Lamaze, GardenBug Foot Finder & Wrist Rattle Set** includes a pair each of socks and wristbands. \$13

“ My baby loved... feet! But not his own: From six months on, Ajax would grab hold of anyone's toes or rub their feet while sucking his thumb. ”

—Beth Zappitello, Portland, OR

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Self-reflection:
Babies take a
shine to mirrors



“My baby loved...
to watch close-
ups of TV
newscasters.”

—Ann Sackrider
Editorial Research Director

opens and closes, its little nose wrinkles in delight.

As amusing as a young baby finds her own adorable image, she has no idea that it's hers. If you put a dot of red lipstick on a 12-month-old's face and sit her in front of a mirror, she'll reach for the dot on her reflection; she won't reach up to touch her own nose. In other words, it won't occur to her that the red dot is on a part of her own face. Around 18 months, she'll finally recognize herself in a mirror (and be utterly delighted by this discovery!).

Good playtime choices: Tie an unbreakable mirror to the side of her crib. She'll also enjoy the flashes of light and color that are captured in the reflections of small mirrors that

come attached to infant toys. Or just dance or sway with her in front of the bathroom mirror.

Noises

What's the attraction? Young babies love noise-making toys for basically the same reason they'll later love xylophones, drum sets, and CDs played at ear-splitting levels in their first car: Sound is an attention getter. (So that's why Mr. Bun's creator put rattles inside the ears!)

"Above everything else, babies love voices," says Gerald McRoberts,

“My baby loved...
a plastic wind-up
tub toy shaped like
a lobster. We
always made sure
we had it when we
went out.

—Beth Vagle, Denver

mouth. Be sure the face doesn't have glued-on plastic eyes or other ornamentation that could be pulled off: a molded face is best.

Mirrors

What's the attraction? You'd think a love of mirrors would be a reflection of your baby's fascination with faces, but in fact, what she really loves is the view of movement and change that's visible through the looking glass. For starters, the little face she sees is awfully appealing—its eyes blink, its mouth

5 things babies *don't* like

- 1. Still faces.** Infants understand people's intentions by carefully observing their expressions. Seeing someone wearing a mask, for example, may startle and confuse them.
- 2. Loud, deep noises.** Higher-pitched sounds—like Mommy's voice or the singer on a lullaby tape—are preferable, so Uncle George shouldn't be insulted if your little one walls when he says hello.
- 3. Sour flavors.** Until they're eating solids, babies are only familiar with the sweetness of amniotic fluid, breast milk, or formula.
- 4. Bright lights.** Although they love shiny toys and mirrors, infants' eyes aren't yet used to full-on sunshine or even the overhead lights at the pediatrician's office. (Ask your doctor to dim them.)
- 5. Overstimulation.** While babies live to be entertained, too many people oohing and aahing at once can leave them grumpy, not grinning. Be sure to give yours plenty of downtime. —KRISTIN KANE

“My baby loved... a photo of a hibiscus flower in a magazine. Grant was so enthralled by it that I ripped it out and mounted it on poster board.”

—Lynne Moser, Greensboro, NC

assistant professor of psychology at Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Beyond that, rattles are perfect first noisemakers. A rattle may seem one-note, but it actually sounds different depending on how hard or soft, or fast or slow, it's shaken.

Good playtime choices: Talk, sing, giggle—have a running conversation with your baby whenever possible. Then look for any toy made for babies that has a sound component. (Just make sure it's not too loud and is pleasant for you to listen to.) You can stick a lightweight rattle into the fist of a very young baby and he'll grab on to it and enjoy the sound it makes when he moves his hand. By 4 months, as he becomes more familiar with the rattle, he'll understand where the noise is coming from. Or buy special socks and Velcro bracelets that

have rattles sewn inside to create a delightful sound track every time he kicks or punches. Once he's 4 to 6 months, he'll enjoy toys that squeak and make other sounds when he squeezes or manipulates them.

Motion

What's the attraction? Ever see a baby mesmerized by a ceiling fan? Things that move are fascinating. They never look exactly the same, and novelty is king for babies.

Good playtime choices: Mobiles that rotate keep the view interesting to a young baby, who spends so much time on her back; often you can change the objects hanging from the mobile for even more variety. The same goes for activity centers and infant gyms that have dangling toys to watch, bat at, or kick. Wind chimes move and sound intriguing as well, making them a fun object to hang wherever your little one spends time in a bouncy seat.

It's easy to find ways to stimulate even a young baby. But just wait. As her abilities improve, a whole new world of interesting play opens up. Take Henry. As soon as he could, he turned his attention to more complex playthings—anything he could pick up and examine, pound, shake, and chew. But even though Henry had abandoned them, I held on to Diver Man and Mr. Bun. Somehow I couldn't bear to lose my firstborn's first loves. ■

Paula Spencer is a contributing editor and a mother of four.

“My baby loved... a silver ball that I wore on a chain. It made a soft, bell-like sound that James was fascinated by.”

—Katy Barr, Vice President, Marketing