



# early enrichment

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## When it comes to bonding and development, the sky's the limit

Tired of games of tag between just you and your toddler? Or maybe you're looking for more fun and meaningful ways to bond with your newborn. Then it's time to venture beyond your home for some structured stimulation and enrichment for your child.

We've showcased several local programs that enhance the parent/child bond while fostering the emotional, physical and social development of newborns and young children. With so many choices, you're sure to find the perfect fit for your family.

**Gym Rompers**, with locations throughout the city, offers interactive enrichment classes that encourage parents and children to explore, crawl, run, jump, and learn together. Each class is composed of children of a specific age, so the activities are appropriate for each group. Catering to infants and young children ages two months to three years, Gym Rompers features singing, musical instruments, puppets, parachutes, and play time on indoor equipment specially designed for the very young.

"We work with parents to develop healthy and fun interactive play skills," says Julie Ponze, M.Ed., founder of the program. "[Our program] allows parents the freedom to enjoy playing with their children."

Gym Rompers offers both day and evening classes—ideal for working parents. It's also available for birthday parties on weekends.

Pat Blackwell, Ph.D., a licensed developmental psychologist and the director of ParentSource, LLC, (and a *nola baby* contributing columnist), is the founder and director of Riverbend-based **WeeWonders** and **TeeWonders**, enrichments classes for infants and toddlers, respectively. The two programs were developed seven years ago in the wake of new research on brain development in children from birth to age three; they're specifically designed to provide parents with information on how to establish the best nurturing environment for their young children.

In both WeeWonders and TeeWonders, all of the areas of infant and toddler development overlap and influence each other, including motor, speech and language, social and cognitive. The classes are led by Dr. Blackwell and a pediatric occupational therapist who provide parents with a range of techniques to stimulate their child's progress, including music, infant massage, movement, and Baby Sign. The classes also address discipline and social and emotional development information for the parents.

"I certainly do not believe in pushing babies," says Dr. Blackwell. "What is most important is relationships. Just about everything that matters for babies happens in the context of a warm, nurturing relationship with a caregiver. This sets the tone for development for a lifetime."

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A variety of enrichment classes are offered by **Infancy to Independence**. I2I, as it is also known, is a non-profit organization that offers classes that feel more like playgroups than instructional sessions. The groups are actually co-operated by the parents of the enrolled children, so parent-child interaction is extremely high.

“I2I is designed to help your child learn to socialize with other children while parents learn positive parenting skills,” explains Laura Melancon, President of the Lakeview Chapter. “It is a great way to build your child’s self-esteem and sense of security through routine.”

Children and parents participate in activities including music, crafts, stories, and free play. There are chapters in Lakeview, Uptown, River Ridge, and on the West Bank. Each group meets once a week and offers structured creative play time for the children up to six years old, as well as an opportunity for the parents to socialize and share ideas.

For parents interested in focusing their young child’s activities on a specific interest, there are music and reading programs for even the youngest aficionados. **Kindermusik** offers structured play through the use of music and movement for parents and their children—from newborns and up to seven years old. Classes, structured according to a child’s age, are led by licensed educators and include everything from music appreciation to playing musical instruments and dancing.

Steve and Melissa Rhodes, who live Uptown, have participated in Kindermusik with their children, Clare and Aran, and are huge fans of the program. “The experience is amazing,” says Melissa. “It was wonderful to be a part of my children’s musical development.”

It’s never too soon to get a child interested in reading, and Marilyn Levin starts engaging them as early as when they’re toddlers. The former kindergarten teacher is the founder and director of **R.E.A.D.** (Reading Enrichment and Development), a dynamic early literacy program built around movement, music, acting, art, and themed activities. Through creative play, children develop their skills and bring books and language into their daily lives.

The youngest participants, 16 months old, listen to books while sitting in a parent’s lap. The oldest children, six year olds, are eagerly beginning to explore texts. Aware of child development, Levin plans her classes around the interests of different age groups to give each a strong foundation for independent reading.

“I’ll do anything I can think of to make books come alive for children” says Levin. “Some children are naturally inclined to go to books, and our program supports that. Other children need more encouragement. I want to find that hook, to get all children interested in books and reading.”

If you’re looking for guidance more than anything else, **The Parenting Center at Children’s Hospital** offers both fun and

helpful education—the former for the child, the latter for the parent. The Center provides a place where parents, through the help of professionally trained staff, can develop competence and confidence in rearing their children. Parents can learn about child development and related skills, receive referrals to appropriate community resources, and discuss concerns with staff and other parents while their children play and interact with other children in a safe, supervised environment.

“Parents and children enjoy the playroom together on a drop-in basis, and participate in music classes and art activities,” says Jenni Evans, Parent Educator at the Parenting Center. “Parents can attend classes on topics helpful to [them] while their children play nearby with our child care professionals.”

Who knew there were so many structured, enrichment opportunities out there for your child? Oh, New Orleans’ diaper set is privileged indeed. 🌸



Gina Piacun and son Grant enjoy a class at R.E.A.D.

For more information about each program, including costs, please contact them directly:

GymRomperers: 504.833.1415; [www.gymromperersfun.com](http://www.gymromperersfun.com)

Infancy to Independence: 504.889.8798

Kindermusik: [www.kindermusik.com](http://www.kindermusik.com)

The Parenting Center: 504.896.9591; [www.chnola.org](http://www.chnola.org), and click on ‘The Parenting Center’

R.E.A.D.: 504.450.3997 [www.readnola.com](http://www.readnola.com)

WeeWonders and TeeWonders: 504.433.2428; [www.weewonders.com](http://www.weewonders.com)