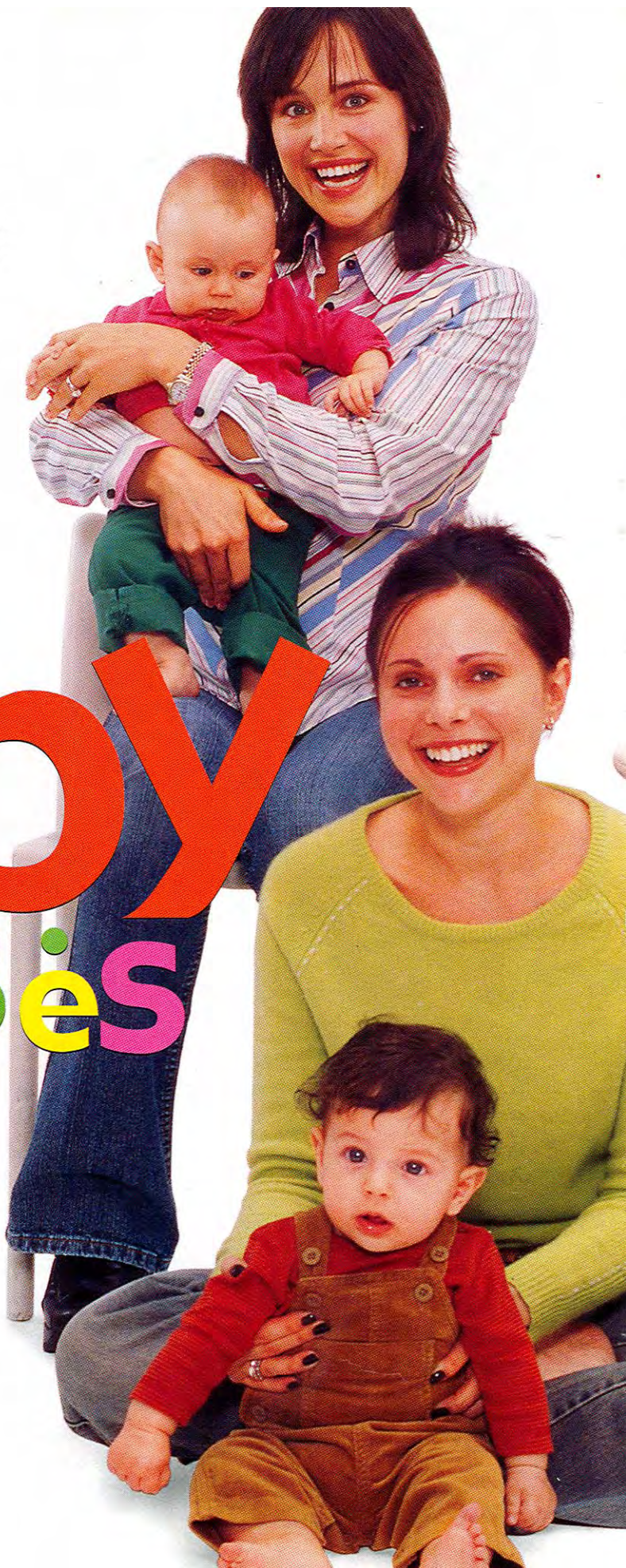


Parent-infant programs are a fun way to bond with your little one, **boost her brainpower**, and meet other new moms.

By Sarah Bowen Shea
Photographs by Benjamin Oliver

the best baby CLASSES

Your baby's adorable—and you love her to death. But frankly, you're running out of ways to keep her entertained. (After all, you can only play peekaboo so many times!) That's where infant classes come in. Besides getting you both out of the house, they offer creative ways to enhance your child's emotional and physical development through song, movement, touch, and more. Here are some popular classes to choose from.



● **Water Orientation** Water classes at local centers like the YMCA teach parents how to play safely with babies, ages 6 months and up, in a pool. Children learn water entry, face-down bubble blowing, front kicking, back floating, and underwater exploration, says Greg Stockton, a national health and safety expert with the American Red Cross. These are not learn-to-swim classes (which children are not developmentally ready for until their fourth birthday, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics). Instead, they help babies become comfortable in water. One safety precaution: There should never be more than eight parent-baby pairs per instructor.

● **Infant Massage** A massage therapist shows you exactly how and where to apply pressure and how to read your baby's cues to guide the massage. Massage can calm your child and help him sleep better, and it has also been proven to help preemies gain weight. Classes are typically either four 1-hour or two 2-hour sessions and are offered at hospitals and community centers. Just make sure the instructor is a licensed massage therapist.

● **Sign Language (Baby Signs, American Sign Language)** Hearing parents and babies, ages 6 months and up, learn to sign through songs, games, and creative play, says Barbara Granoff, an infant/toddler sign-language specialist in Orange County, California. Because it's a visual language, signing stimulates both sides of the brain at once. It promotes intellectual development and hand-eye coordination, and according to one study, even accelerates verbal-language development. Granoff recommends a class based in ASL, which can be a lifelong skill. Other classes teach signs just for a limited number of things babies are interested in, like "bottle" or "book," and the skills are intended to be used only until your child is 3 years old.

● **Foreign Language (The Language Workshop for Children)**

Learning a second language enhances a child's awareness of her primary one. And the similarities and differences between the languages help her understand the sounds, the words, and the rules for putting sentences together. "Plus, the more words a child hears by 2, the more her vocabulary will grow," says Cindy Kennedy Reedy, a child-development specialist at Arcadia University, in Glenside, Pennsylvania. These classes engage babies with short, language-based activities that incorporate song and dance.

Baby Music

(Music Together, Kindermusik Village, Gymboree Quarter Notes)

Moms sing with their babies, play instruments, and dance. "Music classes help with language and rhythm, and they can build children's motor skills and vocabulary," says Virginia Mann, Ph.D., a professor of cognitive sciences at the University of California, Irvine. Make sure a group sing-along is your cup of tea: A shy mother might dread each class. The best classes provide CDs, tapes, and songbooks so you can belt out tunes at home.

