ALL BABIES COUNT
Support for parents

NSPCC
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Congratulations!

Becoming a new parent is a really exciting time. But it can also be worrying. You may be thinking about what sort of parent you'll be. You may want to know what changes your new child will bring to your life, and how you'll cope with the challenging and rewarding job of bringing up your baby.

Every new parent faces challenges. Bringing up a baby will change many things, including your close relationships, so you need to be prepared. But there's a lot you can do to get yourself, and your partner, ready for life with your child.

One of the most important parts of being a successful parent is being ready in yourself. A happy, stable and secure home life - no matter what type of family you are - is the best place for a child to grow up. We know that the first year of a child's life is very important. By starting your life together in the right way, you're helping your child become confident, happy and healthy.

Babies are very vulnerable and it's important we provide them with a safe, loving environment and do everything we can to protect them. Even the most loving and caring parents will sometimes find it hard. This booklet will help you do the best that you can, and will show you how to get help if you think you need it.

One thing we should explain, is that although we use the word 'parent' throughout this booklet, we're using it to refer to anyone who is responsible for looking after a child - not just birth parents.

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Getting to know your baby

For some parents, love comes instantly. For others, the feelings take time to grow. If you don’t make an instant connection with your baby, don’t worry. Don’t expect everything to be perfect, as this can put pressure on you. Just try to relate and spend as much time as you can early on with your baby. You’re getting to know each other and that’s the first step.

The first year of life is when babies learn about the world around them and their place within it. They relate to people, for instance by gazing at their parents, watching facial expressions, listening and responding to voices, and through gentle touch. Babies become close to adults who are kind and caring. Loved babies become more confident, caring and sensitive and will be better at relating to people in later life.

Keep the baby in mind

Babies don’t understand the pressure you might be under, but they want you to think about them and understand their needs. Your baby will take up a lot of your time and attention – even when you are tired, hungry or fed up.

One thing that will help you and your baby is looking after yourself and getting support from friends, family, or professionals when you need it. The best thing you can do is know that it’s OK to ask for help, or ask questions. You won’t be the first parent with questions to ask, and you won’t be the last.
Things you can do to bond with your baby

- Cuddle your new child, skin to skin – they will respond to the warmth and closeness.
- Hold and stroke your baby, and comfort them as soon as possible when they cry – they will feel loved and protected.
- Even if you’ve had babies before, each one is different and you need to spend time getting to know your new child. Watch what your baby does, talk or sing to them, look into their eyes and see how they respond to you – newborn babies might not be able to speak but they can communicate with you in other ways. Think about what your baby might be feeling. Learning to understand them early on will make you closer.
- Babies move from wakefulness to sleep differently. Every baby does this in their own way – some move between these states very quickly, whereas others will stay in one state for a long time. Recognising your baby’s pattern will help you to respond at different times.
Life brings its own challenges, but once you have your baby you may find it harder to cope. Difficulties in a parent’s life can have a serious impact on your baby. That’s why it’s important to get support with your own challenges if you are finding things tough.

On pages 18-19 you can find out where to get support with difficulties around:

- money
- housing
- work pressure or unemployment
- health problems, including depression or mental health problems
- disagreements with friends and family
- difficulties in your relationship with the baby’s other parent
- drugs or alcohol
- domestic abuse
- feelings of loneliness
- discrimination,

Remember, if you are experiencing problems it doesn’t make you a bad parent. Getting help for yourself will help to keep your baby safe.
**Emotional health**

Many parents feel stressed and tired, especially with lack of sleep. However, if you experience mental health problems – and an estimated one in four people will at some stage in their life – it’s important to think about how you can manage while also doing the best for your baby. A lot of people with mental health problems experience depression and anxiety. Babies are affected by the moods of their parents; they need your love, care and guidance. This can be exhausting and may mean you occasionally need extra support. Talk to your GP or health visitor, who will be able to help.

**Problems with drink or drugs**

Babies are seriously affected by parents’ use of drink or drugs, both during the pregnancy and once they are born. Parents who have problems with drink or drugs can struggle to be as nurturing, consistent and predictable in their parenting as they might otherwise be.

If you or your partner are struggling, help is available. Speak to your GP or health visitor about getting support.

**Domestic abuse**

Domestic abuse is threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between adults who are, or have been, partners or family members. Nobody should have to put up with domestic abuse. It causes physical harm, but it also creates significant emotional damage. Witnessing domestic abuse can damage a baby’s development and emotional wellbeing. They may be scared by loud noises, such as shouting. Domestic abuse in the home can prevent parents looking after their child’s needs. And babies can pick up the tension and stress that’s felt by a parent.

If you experience domestic abuse, support is available. We know it can be hard to seek help, but it’s out there and it’s the best thing for you and your child. Contact your GP or health visitor and ask them for help. Page 18 has details of our website which provides a further list of contacts.
Feeling down and getting help

Pregnancy and the birth of a new child can be very exciting. But many parents also have moments when they feel overwhelmed and anxious. Although it is quite common to feel like this, it can leave you feeling alone, as though you’re the only new parent going through these emotions. It is absolutely normal and natural to have moments like this. Often, rest and a good support network of friends or family will help you get over these feelings.

However, some parents feel down for longer. It can be hard to tell the difference between the low feelings many parents feel and postnatal depression. Depression doesn’t always begin at birth, it can sometimes start during pregnancy, or may start a while after birth. Feeling sad or guilty, being unable to sleep or concentrate, or feeling irritable are all signs you might need extra support.

About one in seven mothers experience postnatal depression. Postnatal depression can take away your pleasure in your baby. Babies need you to respond to them. Mothers without the energy or interest to do this need help from health professionals so they can recover as quickly as possible. Fathers can also experience depression, especially when the mother is depressed. Babies are affected by their parents’ feelings, so if you’re finding it hard to cope it’s important to get help. Talk to your GP or health visitor.
Top tips

- Get rest. Ask family, friends and your partner if you have one, to give you the chance to take a break. Even a short time away from your child can help get your energy back. But do not leave your baby alone.

- A change is as good as a rest. Try and get out of the house and meet other new parents. Joining a group for new parents and babies is fun for your baby and gives you the chance to meet new parents who understand how you feel because they are in the same situation.

- Spot the signs and offer support. You’ll meet lots of other parents. If you know someone you think is struggling, talk to them, offer them support and encourage them to talk to a health professional. They will appreciate your concern – whether there’s a problem or not.

- If you or your partner are struggling, speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP. Help is there for you and you won’t be judged.
Crying

If your baby cries a lot it can be very difficult. At first crying is the main way your baby 'talks' to you. Even if you have other children, you need time to get to know your new baby, find out what they like and how you can meet their needs.

Colic

Not all health professionals agree that colic exists. It generally refers to excessive crying that affects babies under four months. It is not proven, but it may be caused by feeding problems, allergy or intolerances, over-stimulation or the baby's digestive or nervous system not being fully developed. If you think your baby has colic, ask your GP or health visitor for advice.

Babies cry for many reasons

They might be:

- too hot or cold
- in need of a nappy change
- upset and wanting a cuddle
- over-stimulated and needing to be laid down quietly
- bored and in need of company
- in pain because they're teething
- unwell – if crying seems unusual or is accompanied by a high temperature or a lack of appetite, always check with your GP or health visitor.
Top tips

- All babies cry – it’s their main language so it’s not possible to stop it completely.

- Our brains are geared to respond to crying, so you’ll pay attention to your baby’s needs. It helps babies survive. Knowing this doesn’t stop the stress – but it helps you manage it.

- Babies never cry to annoy you or because they are being naughty – they just need help sorting out how they feel.

- Remember: when your baby cries it isn’t your fault or your baby’s fault.

- It’s impossible to spoil a newborn baby. The quicker you can respond in the early days, the more secure your baby will feel.

- To begin with, your baby’s main reason for crying will probably be hunger. Feeding on demand is easiest in the early days – eventually your baby will settle into a routine.

- Babies whose cries are answered straight away when they’re young, cry less as they get older.

- Knowing you will always come to care for them helps babies develop self-esteem and grow into confident children.