Getting to know your baby

Information for parents

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As parents we all want the best for our children and we worry whether we are “doing things right”.

The way our children are cared for in the early years of life sets the foundations for their ability to understand their world and join in rewarding relationships with us. How we are cared for in early childhood has an affect on how we manage the ups and downs in later life and the types of relationships we make.

If we can help our babies feel enjoyed, loved, comforted and protected then we are helping them feel valued and understood. They become confident to explore the world and enjoy learning. Relationships are the building blocks to brain connections (80% of the brain develops in the first three years).

All babies are different

By just weeks old, babies are trying to make sense of their world and they are learning that what they do causes a response – such as with a smile.

Babies give their own cues for being tired, hungry or upset. Being affectionate is as important for babies as looking after their physical needs. They don’t just take in food and comfort but they need to feel safe and secure.

They have different temperaments. Some babies with a “sensitive” temperament may need a calmer room to sleep in than others (less light and noise). These babies may cry or fuss more than others and need more patient care.

Others may be passive, “laid back” and may manage being in a noisier room and tolerate more handling. More playful stimulation may bring good responses.

If you can pick up warning signs then you can anticipate and avoid many problems.

Communicating with your baby

Getting it “right” depends on getting to know your own baby and their style of showing you what they need or how they are feeling.

If you take time to really get to know your baby you can learn how to get the most enjoyment from those times when you are playing or talking together. Babies are sociable right from birth and watching and listening to your baby helps you understand how they are feeling. Try to pay special attention to their ways of showing they are hungry or tired.

Taking turns

Babies like to join in conversations and take their turn. We need to give them a few seconds to do this and watch as they give us a cue, such as by gurgling or smiling. Just like adults they need time to take breaks from chatting.

Seeing

Babies can see from birth but at first focus best on things about eight inches away from their faces. They respond to facial expressions.

Babies show they can recognise the shape of a face. They prefer faces to random patterns. Experiments show a baby will increase the intensity of their sucking in response to seeing a screen with a smiling image of their mother.
They like to watch black and white contrasts and bold patterns. This exercise helps their eyesight develop. Babies like to watch moving objects. Sometimes babies find watching a patterned picture or a mobile restful so this needs to be within your baby’s range of vision.

They are ready to mimic mouth expressions from minutes after birth - showing their tongue in response or widening their mouth. Babies perhaps have most control over their mouth.

**Hearing and listening**
Babies can hear everything but they show a preference for the voices of their parents at birth. Talking to your baby can help form bonds. These conversations and reading or singing to your baby form the foundations for later learning.

Sometimes just the sound of a familiar voice is enough. When a baby is upset a soothing lullaby or comforting words may help.

Babies like “time out” and enjoy quiet time and breaks from background noise, such as the TV.

Babies soon show they enjoy taking part in conversations. Babies can learn any language and being exposed to the rhythm of language helps form the basis of their language development.

**Smiling**
Although babies seem to smile from birth this is usually a reflex behaviour in early weeks. If you smile back and show you enjoy these smiles your baby learns that they are smiling at you.

**Cuddling**
Some babies like to cuddle and some don’t. Others may just like a cuddle at certain times, such as when they are sleepy. Often your baby will show a preference for which position they like to be cuddled in. If your baby is upset or tired rocking gently, held in a horizontal, cradled position, may be helpful.

If they are upset but wide awake then an upright position, being held over the shoulder, may be soothing.

**Crying**
Crying is a natural expression for the baby and is another cue they give us about the care they need. Babies will cry when they are uncomfortable, hungry or upset giving us the message they need to be given comfort, food or warmth.

Babies who cry more than usual may be sensitive and showing they need extra support and care. It is important not to let small babies cry for long periods.

You can try letting your baby cry for five minutes and then picking them up and soothing them for five minutes. If they are still crying, let them cry for another five minutes before soothing them again. You can repeat this until they settle.

Long periods of crying may mean that your baby is sick or in pain and if this happens call your doctor.

Listening to crying is often stressful for parents. It can help to know that excessive crying often reaches peaks at times of rapid brain development such as at six weeks and between 12 and 16 weeks.
Traffic lights system for baby’s cues to communicating with you

**Green** – Signs your baby wants to have a social time - looks at you, has a bright expression, joins in babbling conversations or reaches towards you.

**Amber** – Signs your baby needs you to change something - looks away, tries to turn away, yawns, puts hand in front of their face or becomes very restless or expressionless.

**Red** – Signs your baby needs things to be stopped and changed - turns away, arches their back, cries, fusses or is sick.

**Waking and sleeping states**

During each day your baby moves between different levels of sleepiness and wakefulness that are called “states”. Learning to read the cues about which state your baby is in helps you to respond more effectively to them at different times.

These are:

1. **Deep Sleep** – steady breathing, eyes closed, still and hard to rouse. Babies grow while they are sleeping and it is good to protect their sleep.

2. **Light Sleep** – rapid eye movements behind closed eyelids, some face movements, or fussy noises and easy to rouse.

3. **Drowsy-dozing** – eyes may be open but not focusing and likely to make some movements, sometimes startles.

4. **Quiet and alert** – bright eyes and face, showing interest in a face, voice or mobile. This message is time for company, games or feeding.

5. **Active alert** – arms and legs move vigorously, shows some fussing. Your baby is telling you it is time for them to have a break. You may need to slow down or change what you are doing.

6. **Crying** – lots of body movements and grimaces. Your baby is asking to be comforted.

**Soothing your baby**

Doing the same comforting routine over and over again is often more effective than doing lots of different things. So if what you are trying isn’t calming your baby after a while then change it. Holding your baby close and rocking them while talking or singing can help. Using a baby carrier or taking them for a walk may help. If your baby does not suck his thumb then you could try a dummy.

**Parenting challenges**

As parents we give messages out about whether we are annoyed, bored or upset by our child’s distress. All parents struggle to manage the intense emotions and exhaustion caring for a baby brings.

Always remember when you make a mistake as all parents do then there are lots of opportunities to make up for it. Having support from family or friends with your baby’s care can help give you time out. If anxiety or depression is stopping you enjoying your baby it is useful to seek professional help. Your midwife, health visitor or doctor can offer advice or refer you for psychological support.