

Your New Baby, Your Family & You

Pregnancy and the birth of a new baby is a new step in your life, and may stir up hidden feelings, hopes and fears for mothers, fathers and other members of the family. These thoughts and feelings can take you by surprise. Knowing that this can happen, and understanding why, may help you to manage your own response and to give your baby a sense of security from the start.

Pregnancy and birth

You may have thoughts about what your new baby will be like and how you will feel about your responsibility for his or her wellbeing. These thoughts can be related to your own past experiences, culture or religion as well as current views about the best ways to bring up babies.

Both the physical and the emotional experience of birth is important for mother, father and baby. You may want someone to be with you at the birth who you feel safe with, maybe your partner or a close friend. Fathers may want to be present at the birth to create a close bond with their baby right from the start, as well as to support their partners.

Every parent approaches the birth with their own expectations and fears. You may find that you have mixed feelings about the birth. Joy at the birth and happiness at becoming a mother or father may be combined with a sense of resentment for the pain that your baby is perceived to have inflicted during the birth, or loss of special closeness between the couple.



The influence of childhood memories

Every parent was once a child and has experienced the passionate and powerful emotions of a child themselves. Our past and the journey we have made to adulthood are important parts of our identity and of all our relationships, especially our relationship with our own children. The child you once were may reappear more vividly in your memories and dreams during this period of approaching and becoming a parent, and feelings and memories of being cared for by your parents or others may surface too. You may have a fond image of them and wish to be like them

with your own child. But you may feel you did not grow up in a loving, safe family environment, and do not have an image of a loving parent. This can affect how you feel and act. On the one hand it can help you imagine how your baby is feeling, but on the other hand these memories can make you vulnerable to powerful, and at times overwhelming, feelings towards your baby. When feeling tired or impatient, it can be helpful to ask yourself, 'What is my baby trying to let me know?' or even wonder out loud to your baby, 'What are you trying to tell me?'

Your baby's development

Babies come into the world geared for development. They are social beings who develop through interaction with you and with other people. The early months are crucial for their emotional and mental growth and the child's early experiences will shape their development.

At first, a baby develops emotionally and physically from having all their needs met.

The newborn baby cannot bear delay and needs you to respond very quickly. Security comes from not having to wait too long to be comforted, fed or cuddled. Within a few months you are likely to find that your baby can tolerate some frustration. However, each baby is different and will take their own time to learn how to manage themselves so that they can be left for a little longer and you can have a bit of time to yourself.

Getting to know one another

During the first months you are likely to find your baby all-absorbing and needing your complete attention. Babies need their mothers and fathers to be preoccupied by them and to enjoy them. Getting to know the rhythms of your babies needs and moods and how you respond to each other is important. The earliest rhythm is between sleeping and waking, hunger and being full, comfort and distress. Babies have different rhythms that may not match those of their mother and or father, but you can learn to adapt to each other over time.

Learning to understand how your baby is feeling is as important to their development as is the physical care you provide.

You will do this through observing your baby's facial expressions, his or her body tension, whether your baby turns towards or away from the stimulus of your voice or a toy. Such behaviours are active communications about whether they feel good at that moment or whether what is happening to him is unpleasant. Your baby is communicating this to you in the hope that you will respond. Adjusting your behavior to your baby's cues – such as following his/her lead in when and how to play, and when to allow a few moments to quieten down, comforting an anxious cry - will indicate to your baby that you are 'listening' and your baby will feel understood and therefore emotionally safe with you.

It may be helpful, when feeling tired or impatient, to ask yourself: 'what is my baby trying to communicate to me?'

- Think about your baby's needs: 'Are you too hot? ... is it nice being stroked?'
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Work out their likes and dislikes: 'I think you prefer to be held in this position.'

- Try to reflect on your baby's state of mind: 'Are you crying because you are lonely? ... does something hurt? ... are you frightened? ... do you need me to be here?'

Ask yourself also – 'what am I communicating to my baby?' When you pick her/him up – do you smile to welcome face to face chats, or are you usually impatient at being at your baby's beck and call? Do you talk in a sing-song way that envelopes your little one, or is your voice abrupt or even harsh? From the way you handle your baby s/he will develop feelings about him or herself 'my mummy loves me, so I feel like someone worthwhile' or 'my mummy doesn't like me – I guess I am not moveable'. These are not conscious thoughts at the beginning, but these feelings in the body become the way we think about ourselves and about relationships over time.

Feeding

Feeding is not only a time to eat and gain weight. It is also is a time for intimacy and tenderness between you and your baby – through looking, touching and playing, gazing at one another, cooing and taking turns in 'babbling' conversations. When babies 'latch on' with gusto, they are showing their passion for the whole physical and emotional experience of being cared for by you.

Feeding by breast or bottle is also a time for babies to begin to experience some control over their own activities. With your help in the beginning, as in burping or staying awake long enough to eat, babies will gradually learn to manage themselves more.

Sleeping

Babies' sleeping patterns vary enormously. Babies differ in the way they fall asleep, and this is linked to their feelings about being separate and alone. Each baby is different in their mental states and moods on waking. Some are wide-awake and ready to meet the world, some are sleepy, jumpy or dreamy. Others seem to need their mother to hold them together until they are fully awake and alert.

You may feel anxious when your baby's sleeping pattern does not meet your expectations or your own needs.

When you are tired, your baby's wakefulness may seem to be a sign that something is wrong. But most babies under about six months old wake up regularly during what an adult would think of as night-time, and it is not unusual to have broken nights for much longer.

Play

Relationships are two way from the beginning. Babies are ready to participate actively to the best of the developmental ability. An important ingredient is the back-and-forth of play and playing. Baby looks at parent and parent smiles - baby see parent's smile and kicks his leg enthusiastically - parent lift her hand and beats the air in time with the baby's leg movement. This is play with a young baby and is all important in shaping your baby's brain development. Within a few months toys may be added, but your baby will need to your help to explore and use the toy. For a long time in development, play takes place within your baby's relationship with you and it is only through this that your baby will also learn to play by him or herself.

Comforting and soothing your baby

Babies can experience very strong and raw emotions that overwhelm them and are difficult for parents to tolerate. A crying baby, in particular, stirs up strong emotions in the adult.

All babies need your presence and reassurance, but some babies can be soothed more easily than others. Your ability to be sympathetic to your baby and not to lose patience when they are fretful and miserable, even when you can't quite understand what they want, will help them learn to bear these difficult feelings.

It is easier to comfort a child when you are feeling good in yourself. At times you may feel interested and sympathetic, but at other times you are quite likely to feel exhausted and hostile. You may notice patterns in your own reactions – for instance, you may have less patience with your baby when you feel unsupported yourself.

When your baby does not settle in spite of all your efforts, you may feel hurt or worried.

At times you may feel like blaming your baby for the emotional demands they make on you. But babies do not intend to be demanding – they cry because that is the only way they can express their physical or emotional needs. A newborn baby has no idea of 'playing up' or 'doing something' to your feelings – the baby can hardly grasp that you are a separate person from them.

You and your family

A new baby – especially the first baby – changes everything. Having a baby can enrich your own and your family's life and, at the same time, restrict your hopes and plans.

Your family will need to reorganise itself around the new baby. Fathers need to form their own relationship with the baby, which may take time. Even though they welcome their new roles, the family may take time to adjust to the loss of the patterns they are familiar with. If you are living with a partner, there will probably be less time for every aspect of your relationship, including talking and doing things together – and sex. Either of you may feel as if you have been replaced by the baby. It is important to find a way of talking to one another about these feelings or they may affect your relationship with each other as well as with your baby.

Brothers and sisters, or stepbrothers and sisters, may look forward to the new baby, but they will often also feel that they have lost some of your attention to the demanding infant.

By acknowledging their resentment, you will help them to accept their angry and hurt feelings.

But it is early days. With sympathy and patience, unsettled feelings towards the new baby can be resolved and loving family bonds will emerge.

If it all becomes too much

If you are feeling overwhelmed or distressed, it may be important for both you and your baby to talk with a sympathetic adult – in particular, someone who can offer professional support such as your health visitor or GP. In some circumstances, you and your baby and your family may need the support of a specialist service. The perinatal period refers to pregnancy and the year that follows the birth of your baby. It is now well understood by professional and increasingly by the public, too, the difficulties in the perinatal period are more common than thought, can happen to anyone, and usually pass with the right kind of help.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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