

4

Getting to know your baby

You are about to become a mum, again or maybe for the first time. This is a time of great change, on the outside and inside!

This chapter will help you understand what your baby needs to feel safe and secure and will help you get off to a good start with caring for your baby. It will also explain where to get help if you need it.

Baby brain development

During the last three months of pregnancy and the first two years of life your baby's brain is developing at a rapid rate. Responding to your baby's needs can support emotional and mental development. Developing a close and loving relationship with your baby will lay the building blocks for growing into a secure and confident child and adult.

Saying 'hello' to your baby can start today

Pregnancy is a special time and you are probably already starting to connect with your baby. This will help you form a strong and loving bond with your baby after birth. You can start to build your relationship by taking time out every day to relax, stroke your bump, talk or sing to your growing baby and respond to your baby's movements.

Scans and research show that even in the womb, babies yawn, suck their thumbs and respond to familiar voices and music, perhaps even the theme tune to your favourite TV soap!

Many partners like to get involved at this stage too. Have you thought about who your baby might look like?

Looking after yourself

It is not uncommon to feel a bit anxious or depressed during pregnancy. If you are feeling stressed, try to take some time out for you - have a nice relaxing bath or go for a gentle walk. If you are feeling overwhelmed, talk to your GP or midwife. Your relationship with your partner may also be under pressure at this time. If you think you or your partner need further support, you can talk to your midwife in complete confidence.



Myth

Babies must get into a routine as this makes your life easier.

Reality

Young babies are not capable of learning a routine. Responding to their cues for feeding and comfort makes babies feel secure, so they cry less, which makes your life easier too.

Myth

Babies become spoilt and demanding if they are given too much attention.

Reality

Babies will be calmer and grow up to be more confident if their needs for love and comfort are met.

Giving a warm welcome after birth

Skin-to-skin contact

Even if you have a caesarean section or a difficult delivery, try to have skin-to-skin contact with your baby as soon as possible after the birth. This will:

- keep your baby warm and calm;
- help regulate breathing and heartbeat;
- release mothering hormones to help with bonding.

Try the following:

- place your baby on your tummy with their head near your breast;
- gently stroke and caress your baby;
- allow the baby to focus on your face;
- ask to be left undisturbed to get to know your baby.

What your newborn baby can do

Babies are born knowing how to suck. During the first few days they learn to coordinate their sucking and their breathing.

Newborn babies will automatically turn towards a nipple or teat if it is brushed against their cheek, and they will open their mouths if their upper lip is stroked.

They can also grasp things (like your finger) with either their hands or feet, and they will make stepping movements if they are held upright on a flat surface. Apart from sucking, these automatic responses will

go, and your baby will begin to make controlled movements instead.

Newborn babies can use all of their senses. They will look at people and things, especially if they are near, and particularly at people's faces. They will enjoy gentle touch and the sound of a soothing voice, and they will react to bright light and noise.

Having conversations with your baby from day one

Communicating

Babies can recognise their mother's voice from birth. From the moment your baby is born, they will want to communicate



Myth

Babies need lots of toys to help them learn.

Reality

The best way for your baby to learn is by looking at your face. Talking, listening and smiling triggers hormones that help your baby's brain to grow.

with you through eye contact, facial expressions and body movements. It is good to try to understand how your baby might be feeling.

Your baby will enjoy being talked and sung to and being held, touched and comforted. Your baby needs you to be interested in how they feel as well as their physical needs such as feeding and changing. Online resources, developed by speech and language therapists in Northern Ireland are available at www.publichealth.hscni.net

Young babies are unable to cope with delays in having their needs met. Learn to understand your baby's needs and comfort your crying baby as soon as possible.

Keeping your baby close

It is good for both you and your baby to stay close together, including sleeping in the same room (the hospital may call this 'rooming-in'). This helps

your baby feel safe and secure and allows you to be more confident about caring for them. It is also reassuring to have your baby close by and means that feeding is established more quickly, especially if breastfeeding.

You can also keep the close relationship going by placing your baby's cot or Moses basket beside your bed at night and using a soft baby carrier (sling) during the day.

When choosing a pram or buggy, go for one that faces towards you as this allows your baby to see your face, and you will be able to respond and talk to your baby, which helps them feel safe and secure.

Responsiveness

During the first few months almost all of your time will be taken up with getting to know your baby and responding to their needs.

Caring for babies in a

responsive way helps build a strong and loving bond. This involves keeping your baby close, cuddling and stroking them, talking to them in a soothing voice, learning about their signs when they want to be fed or comforted, and comforting them as soon as possible when they cry.

Trust your instincts – responding quickly to your baby's cries will not 'spoil' them, but make them feel safe and loved and help them grow up to be confident and happy. Security comes from not having to wait too long to be comforted.

Partners

Partners should also spend time holding and being close to the baby. They may feel a little left out, especially if they have to leave you and the baby in hospital and return to an empty home. They may need support and encouragement to get involved. The more you can both hold and cuddle your baby, the more confident you will all feel.

