



Getting to know your baby

Before birth

Whether you are the birthing parent or co-parent, your relationship with your baby begins before birth. Did you know that babies can hear in the womb and be sensitive to bright lights at around 16 weeks? By around 25 weeks of pregnancy, your baby may be moving around to music and responding to touch. They may also get hiccups and you might notice or feel the little rhythmic movements of each one.

Some parents-to-be find it hard to imagine their baby. This may be due to feeling anxious or because their own experience of being parented was difficult. Even small things, like talking about how it feels when you listen to the baby's heartbeat during an antenatal appointment, can help you to begin building a picture of your baby.

Bonding takes time - so don't feel guilty if you don't feel that rush of love straight away.

Bonding with your unborn baby

You can begin to bond with your baby by talking, reading and singing to them, gently rubbing or massaging the 'baby bump', playing music, noticing when they move, kick or hiccup. Spend some time each day thinking about what your baby can do.

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For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

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The early days for you and your baby

Arriving in the world feels and sounds very different for your baby, so it will take time for them to adapt and adjust.

Babies are easily startled by loud noises, changes in temperatures, sudden changes in body position or bright lights or strong smells.

Your baby's brain makes millions of connections every second. From bump to 2-years old is a key time for brain development. Their relationship with you is the most important thing in helping to shape and wire their brain and set them on the right course for their future health and development. Your baby's early experiences really matter!

Supporting your baby's emotional development is just as important as looking after their physical needs. From the moment they're born, your baby can communicate with you through their behaviour. This might be obvious like a cry, or a tiny expression like a flicker of their eyelid. All your baby's movements, expressions and responses are the unspoken words of their first language. Babies can't think like older children, but they do experience strong feelings and bodily sensations.

Every day, your baby will move through different states of wakefulness and sleepiness. Every baby does this in their own way but learning to recognise your own baby's pattern will help you to give your baby what they need and will help them to feel cared for and understood by you. These videos explain the 6 different sleep and wake states:

1. Quiet alert state



2. Unsettled state



3. Crying state



4. Drowsy state



5. Light sleep state



6. Deep sleep state



Too much, too little or just right?

Young babies can quickly become overwhelmed by all the activity and noise going on around them, so it's good to recognise this before they get overtired and upset.

It's helpful to ask 'Are my interactions too much, too little, or just right for my baby at this time?' Further suggestions and tips on how to understand your baby can be found [here](#).

Subtle early signs your baby may be getting overwhelmed

- Breaking off eye contact and looking away
- Closing one or both eyes
- Hiccupping
- Possetting (bringing up small amounts of milk)
- Skin colour changes (dusky or red)
- Sneezing
- Frowning/grimacing
- Yawning
- Hands and feet splayed out
- Putting hands across their face to block eye contact
- Back arching

Babies have short attention spans and can find face-to-face contact quite tiring – they need frequent breaks so observe the signs and, when they look away, pause and give them time and space. When they are ready, they will make eye contact again for more chat.

Babies don't like us getting too close to their face and may turn away. When talking to your baby, staying at a comfortable distance of about 22cms (9 inches) is perfect. This is the distance you would naturally hold them if breast or bottle feeding them.

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Everyday moments count

Life with a newborn can be busy but using the everyday moments to interact with your baby really helps them to grow and develop. Enjoying some skin-to-skin time, going out for a walk each day and chatting about what you can see and hear, singing a nursery rhyme when you are changing their nappy, gently massaging them after a bath, or playing 'peek-a-boo' when you are getting them dressed can all be special times to connect.

Copying your baby's expression - smiling, sad, grumpy, excited - helps them to learn about their feelings. Thinking about how your baby might be feeling and gently mirroring this back to them using your face and voice are important building blocks for your baby's social and language development.

When you cuddle and rock your baby if they are upset, or smile with delight when they are excited, you are creating those positive experiences that will shape their futures. Each day provides new opportunities!

The power of connection

Building a network of support through family, friends, local services and social media can help you enjoy interacting with your baby and meet other parents and carers. Suggestions include attending groups like baby sensory, singing groups or cues-based baby massage classes. Your local Child and Family Centre (see [local council](#)), church, library, citizen's advice centre or even newsagent are good places to look to find out what's on in your area and your health visitor will also be able to help.

Dads and co-parents sometimes think that services and information are not geared up for them. Organisations, such as [Dad Matters](#), support dads to have successful relationships with their babies and there are several other dad-specific resources and organisations available which can be useful (see '[New Dad' Factographic](#) and Parent Tip [How can dads get involved?](#)). [LGBT+ Mummies Organisation](#) provides advice and support to LGBT+ women and people, including providing access to their global community to meet other like-minded families.

If things feel tough

If you are feeling anxious or low in mood, you may find it more difficult to respond to your baby. You may not feel that you are bonding with your baby, or that you're doing a good enough job as a parent. You may be finding it difficult feeding or settling your baby, or feel worried about their behaviour. It can be really hard to tell people how you feel, but there's lots of support out there that could make a difference. Talk to your health visitor about how you feel and any concerns you have about your relationship with your baby.

Additional Resources

For more ideas on playing and communicating with your baby or toddler at home, take a look at these resources:

- [Words for Life](#)
- [Brazelton Centre UK](#)
- [Big Little Moments videos](#)
- [Parenting Counts](#)
- [Baby Buddy App](#)
- [BBC Tiny Happy People](#)
- [Hungry Little Minds](#)
- [NHS Start for Life](#)
- [National Literacy Trust](#)
- [Talk With Me](#)
- [Parenting. Give it time](#)

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