3-9 months:

Discovering My World

A guide for healthy, happy babies aged 3-9 months.



3-9months.co.uk

There is lots of expert advice available, including for families of children with SEND.

Visit 3-9months.co.uk to view this guide online and find useful links.

Introduction

The first two years are a time of very rapid development. Babies grow and learn faster than at any other period in their lives. You are the most important person in their world. This guide is for parents and carers. When we say 'you', we mean anyone caring for the baby.

This guide is about how your child learns about themselves and the world around them. It is based on research and explains how children learn to manage their feelings, pay attention, show what they need and build bonds with family and friends. These skills are often learned through play.

On **3-9months.co.uk**, you can find lots of practical help and good advice about sleeping and feeding.

Share this guide with your family – it will help them too!



How different babies grow

Babies develop in their own way. Some need more time or will learn to connect or play in a different order to others.

This guide describes what many babies do, but there are many healthy ways to grow and learn. Some children, including those with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), may need these ideas adapted. Your health visitor or the professionals supporting your family can help you find what works for your child.

Not enjoying this stage, or finding it difficult, does not mean you are a bad parent. It also doesn't mean you'll always feel this way. With the right support, things can get easier, and you can enjoy spending time with your baby more.

Top tip

If you are ever worried about your baby, or are unsure what to do for the best, don't be afraid to speak with your GP, health visitor, or visit your local Best Start Family Hub or children's centre.

Taking care of you

Spending time with you helps your baby's brain develop. Every time you respond to your baby with a cuddle or a smile, talk to, or play with them, you help them to learn and grow.

You matter too – not only because of what you do for your baby, but because you are important in your own right! When parents and carers feel supported, it helps them and their babies too.

Scan here for more advice.

No two days are the same for parents with babies or young children. These can be happy times, and many are filled with laughter. Then, there are times that can feel as though you are in the middle of a storm with big waves. This mix of feelings is normal and an important part of parenting.

You do not need to be perfect. Things won't always go to plan, and that is OK. When your baby is upset or something goes wrong, try to see it as a chance to comfort, reconnect and try again. They will learn about the ups and downs and frustrations of family life, which is just as important as any carefully planned activity.

Did you know?

I don't need you or my family to get things right all the time. What matters most to me is feeling loved, safe and understood.

Parenting a baby is one of life's most rewarding experiences, but it can also be tiring and at times feel lonely. Talking to other parents can be reassuring and help you feel you are doing OK.

Top tip

Joining groups or going to events at libraries, Best Start Family Hubs or children's centres or other local places for people with babies the same age, can help you find other parents so you can start to build a support network.

If your own childhood experiences are affecting how you feel about parenting or your relationship with your baby, support is available. Talking to a health professional can help. In many areas, specialist parent-infant relationship services can work with you and your baby to strengthen your relationship and support you both.

Learning to pay attention

Young babies often move their attention quickly from one thing to another. As they grow, they become able to focus for longer.

Babies engage with people and objects around them in lots of ways – by looking, moving, pointing or making sounds. When you notice your baby doing this, try to follow their lead. Build on their interest by using language to describe what they are looking at.

Moving, flashing or noisy things can grab a baby's attention very easily, especially when there is lots going on. This can make it harder for your baby to focus on what they want to explore, or on you.

Top tip

Try to give your baby some quiet time each day. This means time without flashing or noisy toys or lots of things competing for their attention. When it is quiet, your baby can look, listen and explore at their own pace. They can choose what interests them and spend time focusing on it.

Why doesn't my baby always look at me?

Babies connect in different ways. Some enjoy looking at faces, while others spend more time listening, touching or exploring. These small moments of connection help your baby learn and grow. If your baby rarely seems to notice faces or voices, or you are worried about how they are developing, talk to your health visitor or GP.



Scan here for more advice.

Learning to communicate and speak



Babies learn best when they can focus on one thing at a time. This could be looking at a toy, 'chatting' to you or exploring an object.

Lots of different sounds at once can be confusing. A TV, music and people talking at the same time can make it harder for them to pay attention and make sense of the world around them.

When your baby starts making little noises, repeat the noises back to them and wait for them to respond. This back-and-forth helps them feel that their sounds and actions can get a response, and supports early turn-taking.

Babies love doing things again and again. Doing things over and over helps them learn what to expect. Playing games like peekaboo, singing nursery rhymes, or being rocked in your arms are small moments every day that can make a big difference to your baby.

Top tip

Try singing nursery rhymes with your baby rather than having them play in the background. Singing nursery rhymes is brilliant for your baby's development, even if you can't sing in tune!

As your baby grows, they will start to join in with nursery rhymes. They might smile, make sounds, wave their arms or copy simple actions. By joining in, they begin to understand the back-and-forth pattern of talking and listening.

Did you know?

What helps me learn from nursery rhymes is not just the music itself, but doing it together with you and taking turns.

Learning to connect and understand each other

Although very young babies may seem happy with lots of different people, the relationship they build with their parents or caregivers is especially important. As they grow, it is normal for babies to much prefer being held by their main carers. This often starts from around six months of age.

Your baby is learning who they know and who feels safe and comforting to them. This is very normal. If your baby becomes clingy or upset with unknown people, try not to worry. With time, patience and reassurance, they can slowly build confidence with other trusted adults.

Playing together forms connection. Try dancing with your baby in your arms or popping bubbles in soapy water together.

Watching your baby and noticing how they react will help you learn what they like and need. Every baby is different. Your baby will show you how they respond to the things they see, hear and feel. The more you watch, listen and spend time together, the more confident you will become.

You know your baby better than anyone else.



Scan here for more advice.

Top tip

Try not to compare your baby with others as it may not make you feel better! They all learn and grow in different ways.

It can be helpful to remember that babies do not show love in the same way as older children or adults. Even if your baby is tired, fussy or wants to explore on their own, they are still building a special connection with you.

Did you know?

As I grow, I might show love in different ways.

When a baby cries and someone responds, they learn what to expect. When they smile and someone smiles back, they learn the same thing. These back-and-forth moments are very important for children's development. But if an adult looks at a phone during play or talking, the child may feel left out. They do not understand why the adult has stopped responding.

Screen use should be avoided for under 2s.

Learning to support emotional ups and downs

Emotional ups and downs happen more quickly when you are a baby and they are often more intense than those for adults.

You can help your baby learn about feelings by noticing how they feel and showing that you understand. For example, if your baby looks sad, you can make a slightly sad face too and gently say, "You look sad. I'm here." Then use a calm voice, a smile or a cuddle to help them feel better.

When you stay calm and comfort your baby, they learn that feelings are OK and that they can pass. Over time, this helps your baby learn how to calm themselves.

Learning to self-feed

Many babies are ready to start trying solid foods alongside milk at around six months.

Signs that they are ready include being able to sit with their head steady, reach for and bring food to their mouth, and swallow food. Some babies, such as those born early, may need a different plan. Learning to feed themselves is about finding out new things, not how much food gets eaten.



Messy eating helps babies learn. As they touch, squash and taste different foods, they learn about new textures and flavours. It also helps them practise moving their hands, fingers and mouth.

Try not to rush mealtimes. Make them as relaxed and enjoyable as possible. Eating involves lots of new skills, such as picking up food, chewing, drinking from a cup, and learning to listen to their body's signals about when they are hungry or full. Young children need plenty of time to practise and learn.

Top tip

Try to see feeding as another chance to connect with your baby. Watch and describe what they do and respond to what they are trying to tell you. For example, they may push food away and you could say, "I see, that's enough banana for you right now."

As babies develop their first teeth, it's important to brush them from the start to help develop good oral health habits for life.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning to move

Try to give your baby space and time to practise movements, without rushing to help straight away.

Did you know?

I learn by practising. When you give me time, space and support to move in my own way, I can build the strength and confidence I need to learn new skills, like rolling over.

At this age, tummy time is an important physical exercise to do for babies – it gives your baby the chance to explore the world from a different position, helping to strengthen the muscles needed to lift their head, roll, sit and crawl.

Try to give them some tummy time every day. Start with short periods when your baby is awake, alert and content and slowly build up over time.

Top tip

Keep an eye out for signs that your baby has had enough tummy time, such as making more noises or fussing. Little and often works best.

Every baby's path to moving is different. Some crawl, some bottom-shuffle, some walk early and some later. This can feel hard for parents who want to know that their baby is doing OK.



Learning at home



Babies do not need expensive toys to play. In fact, they can learn a lot from helping you with daily routines and this helps them learn about things they start using every day.

This may mean these jobs take longer than if you were doing them alone, but they are a fun way for your baby to learn and form connections.

Top tip
Try giving them some spoons to suck or bang or drop while you empty the dishwasher or dry the washing up.

Babies experience the world in different ways from older children and adults. Their brains are still growing and learning, so it takes them longer to process what they see and hear. Things that happen very quickly can be hard for babies to notice and make sense of.

Sharing books together allows you to enjoy some close contact as well as playing an important part in how a baby learns to speak and communicate. Books give babies time to look at the pictures, spot new things and explore them at their own pace. Some TV and video content changes very quickly, which can make it harder for babies to take in what they see and hear.

Top tip
You can get your baby a library card too! Most libraries in England let children join from birth with the help of a parent or carer.

Many libraries and local centres offer free stay-and-play sessions, as well as rhyme-time and story sessions for babies and their grown-ups. These can be a fun thing to do and a good way to meet other local families.

Learning through repetition

Adults have had many years to learn how the world works. Babies and toddlers are still learning this.

They also need things to feel familiar. For example, a baby might hit a spoon on a table many times. They are learning that moving their hand can make a sound.

A baby might also drop a toy on the floor, wait for an adult to pick it up, and then drop it again. They are not trying to be annoying. They are making a pattern they can understand. This is also why young children often want the same story or song again and again. Repeating things helps them learn.

In the early years, repetition is very important for brain growth. As children learn more, they start to enjoy new and more complicated experiences.



Scan here for more advice.

Things your baby wants you to know

Your baby needs you

- Babies experience sounds, lights, touch and movement differently. Some enjoy lots of activity. Others prefer quieter spaces. Getting to know what helps your baby feel comfortable is part of learning about them.
- Babies respond in different ways depending on what is happening, their stage of growing and learning and sometimes just how much sleep they have had.
- Paying attention to your baby and learning their signals is one of the most helpful things you can do.

Your baby is not being naughty

- Babies aren't naughty. They can't control their feelings or behaviour yet. When babies cry, smile, turn away, or make sounds, they are trying to tell you something. Watch and respond to their signals; it helps your baby feel safe and understood.

Expensive toys are not better than you at helping your baby to grow and learn

- Babies can benefit from having some calm, simple spaces where there are not lots of sounds, lights or objects competing for their attention.

At this age, it is normal for babies to wake often

- Your baby's sleep patterns will change as they grow and develop, and there may be many reasons why they are more wakeful at different times. Each baby's sleep is different, so try not to compare your baby with others.

Doing the right things won't always lead to instant results, and that's OK

- Don't worry if you don't see results straight away. Babies learn by doing things again and again. Keep trying, and remember that every little experience helps your baby learn and grow.

If your baby won't stop crying, it doesn't mean you are "doing it wrong"

- Babies cry often and for many different reasons. When they are very young, it is one of only a few ways they can let you know they need you.

Scan the QR code for more advice

- Find your local Best Start Family Hub
- Second vaccinations at 12 weeks
- Third vaccinations at 16 weeks
- Health visitor support, baby reviews and the Red Book
- Weaning and feeding
- Safe sleep advice
- Dentist registration
- Teething and toothbrushing
- Potty training
- Screen time

Visit 3-9months.co.uk to view this guide online and find useful links.

Local information:

Learners from birth

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"This guide helps parents make the most of everyday moments to support their baby's communication, relationships and development as they discover the world around them."

- Paul Waugh, Early Education Minister

"This guide offers trusted support and advice on how babies learn and build strong relationships during their first two years of life."

– Baroness Merron, Early Years Health Minister

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