0-3 months:

The Fourth Trimester

A guide to healthy, happy babies aged 0-3 months.



0-3months.co.uk

Introduction

From birth to two years, babies and toddlers develop faster than at any other period in their lives and need the most care. 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.



The chances are that you heard about the three 'trimesters' during pregnancy. It can also be helpful to think about the time after your baby is born and until they are three months old as a 'fourth trimester'.

It is a time when they need to be close to you for comfort, feeding, sleeping, and learning about the world around them. Babies are still getting used to the world and life outside the womb. Every time you respond to your baby with a cuddle, smile, gentle words and comfort, it helps them learn and it shapes how they grow.

Lots of advice in pregnancy can focus on labour and birth. This can mean that getting back home with your baby can feel like starting a new job with no training. Or perhaps you have had lots of advice and support from friends and family or social media, and you may be left feeling unsure about which advice to follow.

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

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

Scan here for more advice.

How different babies grow

Some babies learn new skills quickly. Others need more time, or will learn to connect or play in a different order. This guide describes what many babies do, but there are many healthy ways to grow and learn.

This is a time when you and your baby are getting used to a new way of life. Together you will find out what works best for your own family.

By noticing and responding to your baby's signals, you are building a strong, loving connection and learning more about them every day. This can help you feel confident in supporting them as they develop. Babies don't come with instructions, but by being together, you will start to learn what your baby needs and what makes them happy.

Spending time with you helps your baby's brain develop. Young babies also sleep a lot – sleep is the time when their brain processes events, strengthens connections and prepares for new learning.

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 to your GP, midwife or health visitor, or visit your local Best Start Family Hub or children's centre.

Taking care of you

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.

Many parents and carers find it hard to talk about difficult feelings after having a baby because they feel under pressure to be happy.

If you are happy, that's great! It is also normal to feel frustrated, anxious or low from time to time. But if you are struggling with strong and/or persistent feelings of anger, sadness or anxiety, or finding it difficult to bond with your baby, you are not alone.

Remember, you know what is normal for you. If you don't feel right, speak to someone without delay. Don't dismiss it as 'baby blues'. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Up to 1 in 4

women and 1 in 10 men have mental health challenges such as persistent low mood or anxiety during pregnancy or childbirth.

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.

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.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning to pay attention

Babies experience the world in different ways to older children and adults. Their brains are still growing and it takes them longer to make sense of what they see and hear. This means they can miss things that happen very quickly or only last for a short time.

Top tip
When you're smiling at a baby, for example, try to hold your expression for longer than feels natural (to you as an adult).

Long before they can talk, your baby can tell you what they are interested in! Watch them closely and notice where they are looking. You can describe and chat about what they might be seeing, hearing, touching or feeling. For example, "you're listening to the birds," "that teddy feels soft," or "you're looking at the light on the wall."

Top tip
Bring objects closer to them and talk about the things that they are noticing.

When you are close together, let your baby see your face if they can and want to. They can learn from your voice, face, touch and the time you spend together.

Top tip
Try using bigger facial expressions when you talk to your baby. Move your mouth more, raise your eyebrows, and make your eyes more expressive.

Babies pay attention to faces as well as voices when people talk to them. Clear, expressive speech and facial movements can help make communication easier to notice. This might feel strange to begin with, but over time, many babies will show you that they like this by looking at you or listening to you for longer.

How babies play will change as they grow. Every time your baby looks, listens, touches, moves, explores or spends time with someone, they are learning about the world. These moments help develop their attention, language and movement skills, and help them feel good about themselves.

Did you know?
I learn about the world by playing. It is one of the most important things I do every day.

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Scan here for more advice.

Learning to move

Babies learn how their arms and legs work when they can move them freely. Give your baby time to wave and kick in a safe place when they are awake.

Top tip
Try laying your baby on their tummy on your chest when they are awake and not sleepy to let them practise lifting their head.

Tummy time is when your baby spends short periods lying on their tummy while they are awake and you are watching them.

A few minutes at a time is enough. Little and often works best. Tummy time helps strengthen the muscles babies use for later movement, such as rolling, sitting and moving around.



Learning to communicate

Babies can hear normal background noise and voices in the womb, so they are already used to hearing sounds when they are born.

Babies easily learn more than one language from birth. Hearing different languages helps them learn about the people and cultures around them.

Did you know?

I already know the voices I heard before I was born, especially my mother's voice.

Top tip

Talk to your baby in the language that feels most natural to you and use lots of different words. Hearing words clearly and often helps babies learn.

Did you know?

If I am learning two or more languages, it may take me a little longer to learn words in each language. But when all my words across languages are counted together, I usually know just as many words as a baby learning only one language.

When your baby is awake, calm and alert, they are ready to interact and play. Responding to your baby during these times can help them learn and grow. However, babies can get upset more easily when there is lots going on.

Top tip

Try to turn down other noises, such as the TV or radio, when you are talking to your baby. This helps your baby focus on your voice. It also makes it easier for you to pay attention to what your baby is trying to tell you through their sounds, expressions and movements.

Learning to connect and understand each other

The early days of parenting are a time of adjustment as you and your baby get to know each other. While your baby may seem content in many loving arms, your voice, smell and touch are already known to them.



Your connection has been growing since before they were born. Your baby's relationship with you is especially important because it supports their lifelong development.

If you would like some quiet time alone with your baby, it's OK to let friends and family know.

Top tip

- Spend plenty of time holding, cuddling and getting to know your baby. Support from family and friends can be a big help too - helping with practical tasks or when you need a rest or some time for yourself.
- Some babies enjoy looking at faces, while others spend more time listening, touching or exploring. Let your baby pay attention in the way that feels right for them.

Scan here for more advice.

Don't worry if your baby looks away or turns their attention to something else. Babies often do this when they need a break, when there is a lot to take in. Looking away is one way babies tell you they need a pause – just like smiling, making sounds or crying. Pause and give them time. When they are ready, they will often look back at you again.

Did you know?

I can recognise smells I already know. Most of all, I like the smell of my mother and the people who feed and care for me.

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 baby may feel left out. They do not understand why the adult has stopped responding.

Screen use should be avoided for under 2s.

Feeding

Whatever way you feed your baby, it can be a time of close physical contact which is extremely comforting and builds the connection between you and your baby.

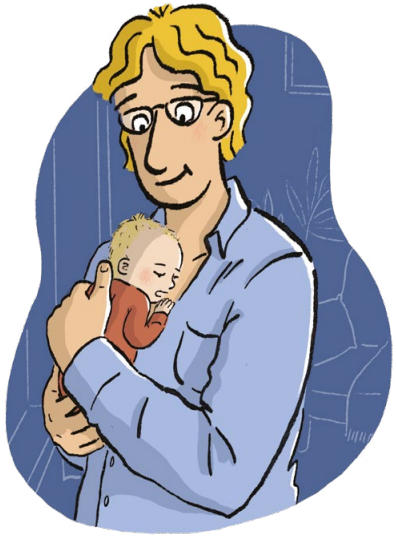
Many parents worry about whether their baby has had enough milk. Babies often show when they have had enough in different ways, such as slowing or stopping feeding, relaxing, turning away or losing interest.

Top tip

There are different ways to feed your baby. On 0-3months.co.uk, you can find lots of practical help and good advice about feeding.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning to support emotional ups and downs



Babies can cry for lots of different reasons – if they're hungry, or tired, in physical discomfort, too hot or too cold, if there's too much going on, or if they need changing.

Sometimes, it can be hard to work out what they need. This does not mean you are a bad parent. If a teenager said they were hungry, you would not think you had done something wrong.

Top tip

Cuddle your baby and try skin-to-skin contact. This can help you both feel relaxed. Cuddles can also help your baby cope when they are uncomfortable.

When babies are held close, cuddled or comforted by an adult they trust, this helps them settle, feel safe, pay attention to and manage their feelings. They will grow and learn these skills over time, with support.

Did you know?

I'm not as good at calming myself as older children and adults, so I need your help. When you calm and settle me if I'm crying, you're teaching me that I can trust others to help me when I'm upset.

Top tip

All babies cry. If your baby's crying feels like too much, there are different things you can do to cope. One is to put your baby in a safe place and walk away to calm down for a moment. Or, try going outside together. Fresh air, open spaces and natural sounds can make loud crying feel less intense and stressful and help you feel calmer. Often, as you feel calmer, your baby will too. If you're struggling to cope with your baby's crying, ask for help.

Young babies usually sleep many times during the day and may become tired after being awake for quite a short time. Watch your baby for signs of tiredness, such as yawning, becoming quieter, looking away or becoming unsettled.

The safest place for a baby to sleep is in their own clear, flat, firm, separate sleep space (e.g. a cot or Moses basket) in the same room as you.

There are lots of reasons why your baby may struggle to sleep and these can change often. All babies sleep better and worse at different times. Each baby's sleep is different, so try not to compare your baby to others.



Did you know?

I can only stay awake for a short time before I need a sleep.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning at home

Babies learn what to expect through familiar routines and consistent responses from the people caring for them. They are new to the world, so there is something to learn from everything.

Singing is wonderful for babies. The tune helps them hear sounds and words more clearly, which supports early language learning. Singing can help you slow down and relax too.

Don't worry if you can't sing in tune. Your baby loves hearing your voice, and that's what matters most!

Top tip

Try looking into your baby's face, singing or talking to them or gently dancing together.

Did you know?

It is never too soon to share books with a baby. Looking at pictures, listening to words and turning pages together can help me feel calm, focused and close to the person reading with me.



Things your baby wants you to know

Your baby is born ready to communicate and learn

- Babies are always learning patterns.
- As things happen again and again, they begin to learn what is likely to happen next. Face-to-face interactions give them lots of chances to test and update what they know about the world.
- The everyday moments you share help them feel safe, understood and loved, and shape their development.

Your baby is not being naughty

- Babies aren't naughty. They can't control their feelings or how they behave yet. Crying, smiling, looking away and making sounds are all ways they let you know what they need.

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

- Babies do not need toys that flash, move or make sounds in order to learn. Simple, safe everyday objects can give them plenty to explore. It is helpful to give babies some playtime without lots of competing sounds, lights or movement, so they can choose what to pay attention to.

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

- Don't worry if something doesn't work straight away. Every day is different, and you can try again tomorrow.

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

- Sometimes babies cry even when all their needs have been met. This can be stressful, but it is not your fault. Staying calm, comforting your baby and asking for support when you need it can help.

Scan the QR code for more advice

- Find your local Best Start Family Hub
- Register with your GP
- Newborn screening and checks
- Health visitor support, baby reviews and the Red Book
- Premature babies
- First vaccinations at 8 weeks
- Second vaccinations at 12 weeks
- Safe sleep advice
- Feeding advice
- Screen time

Visit 0-3months.co.uk to view this guide online and find useful links.

Local information:

Learners from birth

This guide was created collaboratively by:

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"This guide gives parents practical advice and reassurance to help their baby feel safe, loved and supported during those important first months."

- Paul Waugh, Early Education Minister

"This guide provides simple, evidence-based advice to help parents and carers understand and respond to their baby during the vital first months of life."

- Baroness Merron, Early Years Health Minister

Get the 3-9 month guide: *Discovering My World* at 3-9months.co.uk.

