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Towards motherhood

For most mothers, the knowledge that they are having a baby fills them with excited anticipation and maybe just a little apprehension. The birth itself is unlike any other experience—filled with powerful emotions and, for most, pain. For some, the birth experience can be traumatic and can take some time to recover from. But for many, it is a joyous moment when a mother can see, hear, touch and hold her baby for the first time. While love and concern for your baby tend to occur naturally, establishing a relationship with your newborn requires some effort. Reading your baby's cues, learning their own unique nuances and creating a secure attachment with him or her all take time, patience and devotion.

In this chapter, some expectations, realities and challenges of becoming a mum are explored. Do spend some time working through this chapter, which aims to:

- help you make a space for your baby in your mind and in your life so that you feel prepared for this new relationship.
- support you in developing a bond with your baby. While many mothers by this stage are beginning to develop feelings for their unborn baby, some may not have thought much about it yet.
- help you to deal with any mixed feelings or worries you may be having about your baby.
- get you to look back to your own childhood experiences of being parented so you can be aware of how this may influence your relationship with your baby.
- provide you with ideas to support you in your own mothering of this new baby and to look forward to the future.

Getting to know your baby—a growing experience

Life is busy and it may be hard to take enough time to stop and enjoy living in the moment! When you find out you are pregnant, the focus is often on the days and weeks in pregnancy left before your baby will be born, but what about you and your baby *now*?

The exercise below focuses on your emotional connection with your baby. You will find this exercise most helpful if you first create a relaxed mood, close your eyes and try to imagine your baby as clearly as you can. (Some suggestions to help you to do this are offered.) You may like to write your experiences after each suggestion.

Tuning in to your baby

How do you imagine your child? Try to visualise your baby both in pregnancy and as he/she develops through infancy, childhood and into adulthood. Jot down your thoughts below. What do you imagine yourselves doing together? Try to picture yourself as a mother, feeding, holding and bathing your baby.

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How do you expect your baby to be—in terms of physical appearance, personality, and behaviour (for example, crying, sleeping, smiling, feeding)? Do the names you have chosen 'fit' this baby in your mind?

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What expectations, hopes or fears do you have for your baby?

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Do you include your unborn baby in your daily activities (such as talking to him or her, massaging your tummy or playing music)? How do you feel your baby reacts? Can you feel your baby by stroking your tummy? Does your baby move when you touch your tummy? Can you feel when your baby has the hiccups?

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For many mothers-to-be life can be stressful, as there may be many other life issues and priorities to deal with. As far as possible, try to make time to connect with your baby each day by making a time to relax and 'tune in' to each other. You may like to combine this suggestion with the previous exercise, to help hold your baby in your mind, so that your baby becomes a part of your everyday life and consciousness.

Common feelings for the 'mother-to-be'

Waiting for motherhood is a complex time when women can experience a wide range of feelings and emotions. This, together with lots of new physical changes, marks the beginning of a new stage. It can feel scary. Mixed feelings are normal and a necessary part of preparing yourself for changes and the new life to come.

Your mixed feelings could be due to the discomfort you feel in pregnancy or the unknown of having a baby. For example, your unborn baby might move a lot, making it difficult to get comfortable; or you may feel resentful about loss of sleep. Try to be accepting. Your baby is not 'kicking' you to wake you up, but is also trying to get comfortable in a small space.



Remind yourself that a baby is not ‘aggressive’, but just active and alert. Maybe mothers need to experience these things to remind them of the changes that are coming. It may all be part of the progression ‘Towards Parenthood’!

However, be aware of how feeling downcast or tired might influence how you interpret what your baby may be doing to you. Try to focus your mind on *positive* imaginings about your baby. It may help to keep a journal or discuss your feelings with a supportive person, such as your partner, another pregnant woman, your mother, friend or a counsellor.

Do you have any specific thoughts, worries or fears about how you are coping or about the future? Try listing them below.

For example

‘I might not get enough sleep. I can’t cope without sleep!’

‘What if I don’t bond with my baby?’

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To help you get some perspective, put a tick next to the worries you listed that you consider realistic. For example, many things mothers worry about are not really likely to happen; that is, the odds of them happening are low. Most of your fears are just *possibilities*. Your imagination can create havoc through conjuring up all kinds of dire possibilities. If, after doing this exercise, you identify some realistic or likely fears; you could discuss these with someone close to you. Chapters 6 and 7 also contain useful coping strategies for both realistic and unrealistic fears.

The ‘inside story’—feelings after birth

The reality of motherhood is that there are wonderful highs and many joys and intense feelings of love and closeness. But, there can also be challenges.

- Some women have physical discomfort after birth for some time. They can feel tearful, anxious and emotional at times and/or feel confused and overwhelmed.
- Difficulties with sex are quite common for some months and so there is a drop in intimacy while the couple adjusts to the changes in their life.
- Breastfeeding is a skill that needs to be learned and doesn’t always go smoothly.
- Some babies are hard to settle and at times it may be difficult for the mother to know what they need. There is a lot of trial and error and this can lead to frustration and tears.

- Parenting is a 24-hour job and for new parents it can take time to adjust.
- New babies can also be a disappointment! They are all shapes and sizes and sometimes look funny.
- Not everyone responds to your new baby in the way you expect them to.
- Some women feel tearful and experience low mood after the birth; remember it is best to seek help early. These feelings can start during your pregnancy too.

These challenges can mean that disappointment may be part of your experience. Take a moment to think seriously about how you tend to deal with situations when things don't go the way you expect them to.

Some women say they are surprised by the variety and mix of feelings they had after childbirth. Read through the list below which has been compiled by new parents. Circle the ones you anticipate you might feel after the birth of your baby.

AMAZED	DESIRABLE	ALONE
HAPPY	CLEVER	JEALOUS
RELIEVED	TIRED	CONFUSED
SPECIAL	FRUSTRATED	IGNORANT
HONOURED	UNSURE	OBSERVED
OVERWHELMED	TEARFUL	SUPPORTED
VIOLATED	ANXIOUS	UNSUPPORTED
STUNNED	SCARED	INFATUATED
JOYOUS	RESPONSIBLE	BONDED
ELATED	DAUNTED	CHALLENGED

Who nurtures you?

All mother-child relationships ideally develop over time and within a network of support. You will find it easier to develop a close affectionate relationship with your baby if your adult needs for closeness and affection are met.

Do you have a network of other pregnant women or new mothers to share your experience with? Remember—if you are being supported, you can better care for your baby. Many women rely on their partners for nurturance and they certainly play an important role, but don't forget that they need to have supports too!

Take a few moments to think about who nurtures, comforts and supports you. If you do not have a partner, or do not have a supportive one, you might consider other people you could turn to. Friends, family, other mothers you might meet at new mothers' groups when your baby arrives, neighbours or other community groups might all be possible sources of support.