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Caring for your newborn baby

As you near the end of your pregnancy, the prospect of becoming a parent might be feeling more real to you. There is anticipation and excitement about seeing your child for the first time, of looking at and being able to hold your baby. There is also a longing to have the labour and birth over with successfully, and to begin the rest of your life together as a family.

Among the joys and challenges of the first few weeks are questions about how to care for your new baby. 'How will I know what my baby needs?' Thinking about these questions before the arrival gives you the best chance to take in information, consider options and to plan before you are too busy and too tired to think clearly. This chapter will help you to understand the needs of a newborn; it will introduce you to practical parenting ideas for common infant issues. Some activities are provided to help you plan for the future and some easy reference tips are provided to support you in the care of your newborn. Unless you have had a baby before or have had to care for one closely, this is a new area for most.

You may notice that some of the information contained in this chapter is directed more towards the mother, with the assumption that mum is the main caregiver. It is equally relevant to dads, grandparents and extended family.

Understanding newborn babies

Did you know?

- Newborns love face-to-face interaction and play. In the first three months the best distance for the baby to see another's face in focus is 22 cm.
- Some babies find it hard to hold their head up and need support so they are comfortable and ready to interact.
- When babies are contented and alert they are most ready and able to engage in interaction and play.
- Communication between adults and babies is through looking at each other, responding to what you see. This can be a smile or some gentle words.

- Babies prefer to look at patterned objects rather than single colours.
- Very young babies prefer to look at round curved shapes (circles, ovals) rather than straight-lined shapes (squares, triangles).
- Newborns have a clear preference for 3-dimensional objects over 2-dimensional objects.
- As vision improves at around three months, there is a shift towards playing more with objects.
- Newborns have a preference for looking at faces over other patterns.
- ‘Mirroring’ your baby’s expressions and gestures is a way of conveying understanding and acceptance and can help develop your baby’s communication.
- Social interactions can be tiring for babies. Signs that they want to reduce contact include yawning, frowning, grimaces, closing eyes and turning away. These all provide ‘breaks’ from the interaction and are a way of communicating that they want some ‘time-out’.
- Babies differ in response to cuddling. Some babies relax and their body moulds to the parents’ arms or torso. Others are less relaxed and remain a little stiff—they may even resist or pull away. This does not seem to be a personal response to parents but rather an individual difference between babies.
- The way your baby reacts to their world and to others has to do with their temperament, which refers to the unique qualities your baby is born with and has nothing to do with intelligence. Some babies differ in how fussy, uptight, predictable, active, difficult to settle, calm and easygoing they are.

These facts and more can be found in *Your social baby* by Lynne Murray and Liz Andrews (2001), and the article ‘What do babies prefer to look at?’ in the journal *Premiepress: The Psychology of Infancy*, Volume 5 Number 3, September 2004 by Carol Newnham. Getting to know your baby as a unique individual and getting to understand their temperament takes time, just like the development of any other relationship.

Sleeping like a baby

Sleep is often *the* thing new parents focus on. How much will the baby get? How much will I get? *All babies have different needs for sleep.* It may vary from 10 to 20 hours a day in the first few weeks. They also vary in how long they stay asleep, but 2–4 hours would be typical for newborns. Below is a guide to help prepare you for the average needs of infants from birth to 3 months (more information is available in the Parenting Information Brochures at www.karitane.com.au). However, keep in mind that all infants are individuals and many don’t neatly fall into typical statistics.

How much sleep does your baby need?—a guide

Baby’s age	Approximate time after waking to try to resettle	Sleep time	Average number of sleeps
0–6 weeks	1 hour	2–3 hours	5–6 in 24 hours
6 weeks–3 months	1–1½ hours	2½–3 hours	4–5 in 24 hours
3–4½ months	2 hours	2–2½ hours	3 day sleeps



Young babies take time to get used to the difference between day and night. They usually don't sleep through the night for at least several months. You would be best to get your head around the idea that you will not be getting much continuous sleep for the first few months of having a newborn!

In fact, until newborns are at least 3 months old they will wake *at least* once or more a night and this is 'normal'. By the time they are 6 months old, about 75 per cent of babies sleep to sunrise, but 25 per cent still wake during the night. Once they are asleep they will wake briefly due to their sleep cycle but need to learn, in time, to resettle themselves. This is one of the most important things to help your baby to learn. If their settling routine always involves you cuddling, feeding or rocking them off to sleep then you will be needed to do this every time they wake! You would expect to cuddle your newborn baby to sleep, but as they get older they will learn to settle themselves. You can help them to do this by recognising the body language that shows they are tired.

Sleeping tips for your newborn

Are they tired?

- Babies show you they are tired through their body language. They may frown, look unhappy, move their arms, tense their legs, have jerky body movements, and clench their fists and grizzle or cry.
- Experiment to find out the best time to settle your baby—at the very first signs of tiredness or once they are showing all the signs of being tired.
- Remember it is usually easier to settle a baby before they are overtired.

How should my baby sleep?

- Sucking soothes babies and it is a natural reflex in newborns. Dummies and thumb sucking can help babies to settle off to sleep and calm down. This is one of the decisions you will need to make, as some parents find settling a baby is easier with a dummy.