

Child development (1) - newborn to three months

Coming into the world is a big and scary adventure for babies. At first, they don't know you are there to feed and care for them - they only know when they feel comfortable and safe, or otherwise. However, even from birth, they start to communicate and give you little signals when they are tired or hungry, or awake and alert. They are learning all the time, and the job of parents is to help them know that the world is a welcoming place where their needs will be met.

Social and emotional development

Even shy and sleepy babies take an interest in your voice and face. A big section of the brain is devoted to understanding and remembering faces, and a large part of our social behaviour is based on how we 'read' other people's faces. Looking into someone's eyes is a necessity for 'falling in love', so show your baby your face and talk to them soothingly right from the start. Don't feel rejected if they turn away; tiny babies often get tired when they interact.

Newborns:

- Don't understand what is happening to them, or realise they are a separate person
- Don't know who is feeding them, or who helps them when they cry
- Cry when they are hungry or tired, but don't know they are being cared for
- Can't cry 'for attention' or to 'get at' their parents - a newborn is not capable of responding to you with any conscious purpose
- Can feel, but not think
- Smile by five to seven weeks
- Laugh out loud by three months.

Physical development

Common characteristics include:

- Many babies who are under three months cry a lot, especially in the late afternoon or evening. ('Jiggling' babies is not a good way to help them settle and can be very scary or even painful for the baby, even if they stop crying. It is very important not to shake a baby.)
- Your baby is bombarded by external stimuli (shapes, sounds, colours) and can easily feel overwhelmed.

Hearing and seeing

Newborns can hear, and have been hearing noises from well before they were born. Newborns have immature eye muscles and, while they can see (particularly at close range), they can't organise the visual images into meaningful shapes.

Developmental characteristics include:

- In the first two months, they are attracted by bright light, primary colours, stripes, dots and patterns.
- Eyes move in unison, most of the time, by six weeks.
- The human face is the first 'object' they recognise.
- Over the first three months, they begin to recognise particular faces and other things (like their teddy bear) in their world.

Using their bodies

Infants in the first eight weeks have no control over their movements and all their physical activity is involuntary or reflex. They move their bodies while they are awake, but they do not yet know how to make each part of their body move, or even that all the bits belong to them.

Developmental characteristics include:

- Sucking, grasping, startling and pulling to stand are all reflexes.
- They start to work out how to lift their heads when lying on their tummy, and kick their legs by about eight weeks.
- In their third month, they begin to watch their hands and feet wave in the air, and also begin to wave that fist towards your face or some other desired object.

Speech and language

For the newborn, crying is their only means of communication. It is important to respond to your baby as soon as possible, so they begin to understand that you will be there for them.

Characteristics of speech include:

- By seven or eight weeks, they begin to discover their voice and make cooing noises and vowel sounds.
- Even by about eight weeks, they will listen to what you say, then make noises back as they 'talk' to you.

Suggested activities

Suggestions on encouraging and supporting your baby's development include:

- Make a mobile and hang it, facing them, above their cot
- Stroke different parts of their body to see how they like to be touched
- Speak to them gently and use their name
- Play them music
- Sing to them
- Hold them a lot
- Let them look at your face as you talk to them
- Copy their little gestures
- Rock them.

Signs that suggest a developmental problem

All children are different and develop at different rates, so if your baby doesn't do all the things listed in this article, it may be because they are working on some different area of learning and development. However, if your baby is very different from other children, or if you are worried about their development or it seems to go backwards, seek the advice of a health professional.

Signs that could suggest a developmental problem include:

- Unusually floppy or stiff body
- Arm or leg on one side is obviously different in muscle tone or power to the other
- Fingers are always held in a tight fist
- Not watching faces by two to three months
- Not startling to noise
- Difficulties with feeding beyond 'normal' range
- Long periods of crying and persistent difficulties with settling
- The child is exceptionally quiet and placid.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- The Maternal and Child Health Line is available 24 hours a day Tel. 132 229

Things to remember

- Even from birth, babies can communicate with you.
- A newborn doesn't realise they are a separate person.
- Infants in the first eight weeks have no control over their movements and all their physical activity is involuntary or reflex.

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