Child development (1) - newborn to three months
Summary

- 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.

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

**Where to get help**

**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.

**References**


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More information

Babies and toddlers (0-3)

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Babies and toddlers basics
- Newborn babies
- Feeding your baby
- Growth and development
- Behaviour and learning
- Healthy eating
- Care and wellbeing
- Health conditions and complaints
- Sleep
- Safety
- Grief and trauma
Babies and toddlers basics

- Baby bath - bathing (video)
  Detailing on bathing from the Royal Women's Hospital...
- Baby bath - preparation and safety (video)
  Detailing on baby bathing from Royal Women's Hospital...
- Baby bath - skin care (video)
  Detail on baby skin care from Royal Women's Hospital...
- Childhood immunisation
  Being immunised from an early age helps protect your child against serious childhood infections...
- Children and health services
  There is a range of subsidised and free health services, including services for mental health and dental health, available for children in Victoria...
- Early support for a child with disabilities
  For children diagnosed with a disability, getting the support they need as early as possible will give them the best chance of minimising the long-term effects of the disability...
- Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need
  Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influenced by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation...
- Maternal and child health services
  Your local maternal and child health service will be a great source of support after your baby is born...
- No Jab No Play
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age...
- Parenting services
  Parenting is one of the most important tasks we undertake but it doesn't always come naturally...

Newborn babies

- Baby bath - bathing (video)
  Detailing on bathing from the Royal Women's Hospital...
- Baby bath - preparation and safety (video)
  Detailing on baby bathing from Royal Women's Hospital...
- Baby bath - skin care (video)
  Detail on baby skin care from Royal Women's Hospital...
- Jaundice in babies
  If your baby is full-term and healthy, mild jaundice is nothing to worry about and will resolve by itself within a week or so...
- Newborn bloodspot screening
  Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk of rare, but serious, medical conditions...
- Phenylketonuria (PKU)
  PKU is an inherited disorder that prevents the normal breakdown of a protein found in some foods...
- Phototherapy at Home
  Jaundice is very common in newborns, so it’s nothing to be too worried about. Treatment is very easy and safe. It all happens using blue light from a special blanket that you wrap your baby in. The...
- Premature babies
  Sometimes premature labour can be delayed to increase a baby's chance of survival...
- Sudden unexpected death in infants (SUDI and SIDS)

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
You can reduce your baby's risk of sudden unexpected death by providing a safe sleeping environment and avoiding tobacco smoke.

Feeding your baby

- **Asthma - pregnancy and breastfeeding**
  Pregnant women with asthma need to continue to take their asthma medication as it is important to the health of both mother and baby that the mother's asthma is well managed.

- **Baby care - weaning**
  Be guided by your baby and let them set the pace when weaning and introducing solid foods.

- **Bottle feeding - nutrition and safety**
  Breastmilk or commercial infant formula is necessary for all babies less than 12 months.

- **Breastfeeding**
  Breastfeeding positioning and attachment come naturally to some babies and mothers, but many need time and practice to get it right.

- **Breastfeeding and travel**
  Breastmilk protects your baby from illness and infection, so it is the safest drink for your baby while travelling.

- **Breastfeeding and work**
  You can successfully combine breastfeeding with work if you have support from your employer, colleagues and family.

- **Breastfeeding and your diet**
  Breastfeeding women need to eat regularly and include a wide variety of healthy foods in their diet.

- **Breastfeeding - dealing with mastitis**
  Mastitis affects some breastfeeding women and may be caused by blocked milk ducts or a bacterial infection.

- **Breastfeeding - dealing with nipple problems**
  Your nipples may be sensitive in the first few days after birth, but nipple pain is not a normal part of breastfeeding.

- **Breastfeeding - deciding when to stop**
  It is up to you and your baby to decide when breastfeeding should stop.

- **Breastfeeding - expressing breastmilk**
  Expressing breast milk by hand is a cheap and convenient method.

- **Breastfeeding - the first days**
  Let your baby feed as much as they want in the first few days to help establish good breastfeeding patterns.

- **Breastfeeding - when to start**
  Breastfeeding within the first hour after birth allows your baby to behave instinctively and breastfeed with little intervention.

- **Food for babies - tucker talk tips**
  Before six months, breastmilk or formula is the only food and drink that your baby needs.

- **Lactose intolerance**
  Symptoms of lactose intolerance include bloating, gas, abdominal pain and diarrhoea.

**Growth and development**

- **Child development (1) - newborn to three months**
  Infants in the first eight weeks have no control over their movements and all their physical activity is involuntary or reflex.

- **Child development (2) - three to six months**
  Young babies still have a notion that the whole of life is happening inside themselves, and they are 'making it all happen'.

- **Child development (3) - six to nine months**
  Fun activities, such as shaking or banging objects, helps a baby understand they have an effect on the world.
Child development (4) - nine to 12 months

At nine months your baby is moving around by crawling or pulling along with their arms. Safety is very important now. Your baby is also 'talking' with recognisable sounds and may even say simple words.

Child development (5) - one to two years

Between the ages of one and two, your toddler understands they are a completely separate person from you.

Children's feet and shoes

A child learning to walk receives important sensory information from the soles of their feet, and shoes can make walking more difficult.

Growth charts for children

Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'.

Teeth development in children

Teething symptoms are common in children and can be managed without medications.

The Maternal and Child Health phone app

The Maternal & Child Health app (MCH) provides reliable maternal and child health (MCH) information that families can use every day.

Toilet training

When toilet training your toddler, praise every little success and remain calm about accidents.

Behaviour and learning

10 tips for managing sibling rivalry

Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves. 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry.

10 tips to raise an optimistic child

Be a positive role model. 10 tips to raise an optimistic child.

Anxiety and fear in children

You can help your child overcome anxiety by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings.

Children and shyness

If your child's shyness is especially debilitating, you may like to consider professional help from a counsellor or psychologist.

Children and sibling rivalry

Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age.

Discipline and children

Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control.

Dummies

Dummy sucking should stop before school age to avoid teeth or mouth problems.

Left-handedness

If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand.

Tantrums

When a young child is having a tantrum, it is because the emotional (limbic system) part of the brain is dominating the child's behaviour.

Thumb and finger sucking

Finger or thumb sucking should stop before school age to avoid mouth problems.

Toddlers and fussy eating

If you restrict yourself to a narrow range of foods, your child will notice and copy your wariness.

Toddlers and mealtime manners

Some toddlers do most of their eating on the run, refusing to sit down at the table at all.

Healthy eating

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- **Baby care - weaning**
  Be guided by your baby and let them set the pace when weaning and introducing solid foods...

- **Breakfast**
  Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2...

- **Childcare and healthy eating**
  Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children...

- **Children's diet - fruit and vegetables**
  If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables every day, your child may eventually follow your lead...

- **Eating tips for babies**
  First foods for babies can be prepared easily and cheaply at home without salt, seasonings and sweeteners...

- **Eating tips for children (3) - older toddlers**
  Offer children the same foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition...

- **Eating tips for young toddlers**
  Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full...

- **Soft drinks, juice and sweet drinks - children**
  Encourage children to drink and enjoy water. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drinks may cause health problems for children if consumed in large amounts...

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**Care and wellbeing**

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  Being immunised from an early age helps protect your child against serious childhood infections...

- **Children and health services**
  There is a range of subsidised and free health services, including services for mental health and dental health, available for children in Victoria...

- **Child safety in the car**
  Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries...

- **Dental checks for young children**
  Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two...

- **Immunisations - vaccinations in Victoria, Australia (video)**
  Vaccinations are encouraged for all individuals living in the state of Victoria, Australia. The immunisation program in Victoria may be different than other countries, and individuals who have moved...

- **Melissa's story (video)**
  Melissa shares her story of how her baby caught chickenpox at 5 weeks old...

- **No Jab No Play**

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betterhealth.vic.gov.au
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- Phototherapy at Home
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- The Maternal and Child Health phone app
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- Travelling with children
  If your child is old enough, involve them in planning a trip so they can get excited about it.

Health conditions and complaints

- Asthma in childhood - triggers (video)
  Parents and children talk about some of the factors that can cause a child's asthma to flare up.

- Back pain in children
  Children with back pain may grow into adults with chronic bad backs, so it is important to encourage sensible back care.

- Bedwetting
  Bedwetting is a problem for many children and punishing them for it will only add to their distress.

- Bronchiolitis
  Bronchiolitis is a common chest infection in babies under six months of age.

- Colic
  Caring for a crying baby with colic can be stressful, so take some time out to calm down.

- Constipation and children
  A healthy diet, plenty of fluids, exercise and regular toilet habits can help relieve constipation in children.

- Cradle cap
  Cradle cap is not contagious and it is not caused by poor hygiene or bad parenting.

- Croup
  Croup is a viral infection of the throat and windpipe that causes noisy breathing, a hoarse voice and a harsh, barking cough.

- Fever - children
  Fever is a way in which the body fights infection. A fever is not dangerous and does not always indicate a serious illness.

- Gastroenteritis in children
  Gastroenteritis or Gastro can be dangerous for very young babies. Gastro is common in young children and spreads easily. Gastro is a bowel infection which causes diarrhoea (runny or watery poo) and...

- Nappy rash
  Most babies get nappy rash at some stage, no matter how well they are cared for.

- Phototherapy at Home
  Jaundice is very common in newborns, so it’s nothing to be too worried about. Treatment is very easy and safe. It all happens using blue light from a special blanket that you wrap your baby in. The...

- Roseola infantum
  Roseola is a mild viral infection with associated fever and rash that affects babies and young children.

Sleep

- Baby care - moving from cot to bed
  Some children are unsettled the first few nights in a 'big bed'. Try to be patient, loving and reassuring.

- Sleep and your baby
  Sleeping habits are learned, so try to set up a bedtime routine for your baby as soon as you can.
Sleep - children and naps
A child needs a daytime nap until they are around two and a half to three years of age.

Sleep - children and nightmares
Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often.

Sudden unexpected death in infants (SUDI and SIDS)
You can reduce your baby's risk of sudden unexpected death by providing a safe sleeping environment and avoiding tobacco smoke.

Safety

Animals and child safety
Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets.

Babies and safety
Most injuries to babies do not occur by chance - many are predictable and largely preventable.

Baby care - moving from cot to bed
Some children are unsettled the first few nights in a 'big bed'. Try to be patient, loving and reassuring.

Baby furniture - safety tips
Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs close supervision.

Bicycle safety and children
As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users.

Burns and scalds - children
Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom.

Child safety and injury prevention
By making a few practical changes to your home, you can dramatically reduce the risk of injury to your child.

Child safety - at home
The best way to reduce the risk of injury to children is to remove a potentially dangerous item or add a safety product.

Child safety in the car
Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries.

Family violence and children
Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems.

Farm safety – children
Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers.

Hot weather and child safety
Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration.

Playgrounds and child safety
Play environments can be safe and beneficial for your child. With proper planning, you can make sure your child gets plenty of playtime activity.

Poisoning and child safety
Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine.

Road and traffic safety for children
As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users.

Sudden unexpected death in infants (SUDI and SIDS)
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Water safety for children
Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water.

Grief and trauma

- Child Protection Service
Child Protection provides child-centred, family-focused services to protect children from harm caused by abuse within the family.

- Death of a baby
Miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death is a shattering event for those expecting a baby, and for their families. Grief, relationship stresses and anxiety about subsequent pregnancies are common in.

- Sudden unexpected death in infants (SUDI and SIDS)
You can reduce your baby's risk of sudden unexpected death by providing a safe sleeping environment and avoiding tobacco smoke.

- Babies and toddlers can be as affected by trauma as any other family member.

- Trauma and children – tips for parents
Tell your child the facts about a distressing or frightening experience using language they can understand.

- Preschoolers may not have the words but will show their distress at traumatic events through changes in behaviour and functioning.

Related Information

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- Toilet training
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Home

Related information on other websites

- Child health record - Department of Health Victoria

Support Groups

- Parent-Infant Research Institute, Infant Clinic

Content Partner

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Maternal and Child Health

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Provides immediate, expert health advice from a registered nurse. Call 1300 60 60 24

**Multilingual resources on child development (newborn to 12 months)**

- How your baby develops 0 - 3 months
- Babies from birth to crawling - birth to 9 months
- Baby sleep: 2-12 months

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