

ALL BABIES COUNT

Support for parents



NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.™

Congratulations!

Becoming a new parent is a really exciting time. But it can also be worrying. You may be thinking about what sort of parent you'll be. You may want to know what changes your new child will bring to your life, and how you'll cope with the challenging and rewarding job of bringing up your baby.

Every new parent faces challenges. Bringing up a baby will change many things, including your close relationships, so you need to be prepared. But there's a lot you can do to get yourself, and your partner, ready for life with your child.

One of the most important parts of being a successful parent is being ready in yourself. A happy, stable and secure home life – no matter what type of family you are – is the best place for a child to grow up. We know that the first year of a child's life is very important. By starting your life together in the right way, you're helping your child become confident, happy and healthy.

Babies are very vulnerable and it's important we provide them with a safe, loving environment and do everything we can to protect them. Even the most loving and caring parents will sometimes find it hard. This booklet will help you do the best that you can, and will show you how to get help if you think you need it.



One thing we should explain, is that although we use the word 'parent' throughout this booklet, we're using it to refer to anyone who is responsible for looking after a child – not just birth parents.

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Getting to know your baby

For some parents, love comes instantly. For others, the feelings take time to grow. If you don't make an instant connection with your baby, don't worry. Don't expect everything to be perfect, as this can put pressure on you. Just try to relate and spend as much time as you can early on with your baby. You're getting to know each other and that's the first step.

The first year of life is when babies learn about the world around them and their place within it. They relate to people, for instance by gazing at their parents, watching facial expressions, listening and responding to voices, and through gentle touch. Babies become close to adults who are kind and caring. Loved babies become more confident, caring and sensitive and will be better at relating to people in later life.

Keep the baby in mind

Babies don't understand the pressure you might be under, but they want you to think about them and understand their needs. Your baby will take up a lot of your time and attention – even when you are tired, hungry or fed up.

One thing that will help you and your baby is looking after yourself and getting support from friends, family, or professionals when you need it. The best thing you can do is know that it's OK to ask for help, or ask questions. You won't be the first parent with questions to ask, and you won't be the last.



Things you can do to bond with your baby

- Cuddle your new child, skin to skin – they will respond to the warmth and closeness.
- Hold and stroke your baby, and comfort them as soon as possible when they cry – they will feel loved and protected.
- Even if you've had babies before, each one is different and you need to spend time getting to know your new child. Watch what your baby does, talk or sing to them, look into their eyes and see how they respond to you – newborn babies might not be able to speak but they can communicate with you in other ways. Think about what your baby might be feeling. Learning to understand them early on will make you closer.
- Babies move from wakefulness to sleep differently. Every baby does this in their own way – some move between these states very quickly, whereas others will stay in one state for a long time. Recognising your baby's pattern will help you to respond at different times.



Under pressure

Life brings its own challenges, but once you have your baby you may find it harder to cope. Difficulties in a parent's life can have a serious impact on your baby. That's why it's important to get support with your own challenges if you are finding things tough.

On pages 18-19 you can find out where to get support with difficulties around:

- money
- housing
- work pressure or unemployment
- health problems, including depression or mental health problems
- disagreements with friends and family
- difficulties in your relationship with the baby's other parent
- drugs or alcohol
- domestic abuse
- feelings of loneliness
- discrimination.

Remember, if you are experiencing problems it doesn't make you a bad parent. Getting help for yourself will help to keep your baby safe.



Emotional health

Many parents feel stressed and tired, especially with lack of sleep. However, if you experience mental health problems – and an estimated one in four people will at some stage in their life – it's important to think about how you can manage while also doing the best for your baby. A lot of people with mental health problems experience depression and anxiety. Babies are affected by the moods of their parents; they need your love, care and guidance. This can be exhausting and may mean you occasionally need extra support. Talk to your GP or health visitor, who will be able to help.

Problems with drink or drugs

Babies are seriously affected by parents' use of drink or drugs, both during the pregnancy and once they are born. Parents who have problems with drink or drugs can struggle to be as nurturing, consistent and predictable in their parenting as they might otherwise be.

If you or your partner are struggling, help is available. Speak to your GP or health visitor about getting support.

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between adults who are, or have been, partners or family members. Nobody should have to put up with domestic abuse. It causes physical harm, but it also creates significant emotional damage. Witnessing domestic abuse can damage a baby's development and emotional wellbeing. They may be scared by loud noises, such as shouting. Domestic abuse in the home can prevent parents looking after their child's needs. And babies can pick up the tension and stress that's felt by a parent.

If you experience domestic abuse, support is available. We know it can be hard to seek help, but it's out there and it's the best thing for you and your child. Contact your GP or health visitor and ask them for help. Page 18 has details of our website which provides a further list of contacts.

Feeling down and getting help

Pregnancy and the birth of a new child can be very exciting. But many parents also have moments when they feel overwhelmed and anxious. Although it is quite common to feel like this, it can leave you feeling alone, as though you're the only new parent going through these emotions. It is absolutely normal and natural to have moments like this. Often, rest and a good support network of friends or family will help you get over these feelings.

However, some parents feel down for longer. It can be hard to tell the difference between the low feelings many parents feel and postnatal depression. Depression doesn't always begin at birth, it can sometimes start during pregnancy, or may start a while after birth. Feeling sad or guilty, being unable to sleep or concentrate, or feeling irritable are all signs you might need extra support.

About one in seven mothers experience postnatal depression. Postnatal depression can take away your pleasure in your baby. Babies need you to respond to them. Mothers without the energy or interest to do this need help from health professionals so they can recover as quickly as possible. Fathers can also experience depression, especially when the mother is depressed. Babies are affected by their parents' feelings, so if you're finding it hard to cope it's important to get help. Talk to your GP or health visitor.



Top tips

- Get rest. Ask family, friends and your partner if you have one, to give you the chance to take a break. Even a short time away from your child can help get your energy back. But do not leave your baby alone.
- A change is as good as a rest. Try and get out of the house and meet other new parents. Joining a group for new parents and babies is fun for your baby and gives you the chance to meet new parents who understand how you feel because they are in the same situation.
- Spot the signs and offer support. You'll meet lots of other parents. If you know someone you think is struggling, talk to them, offer them support and encourage them to talk to a health professional. They will appreciate your concern – whether there's a problem or not.
- If you or your partner are struggling, speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP. Help is there for you and you won't be judged.



Crying

If your baby cries a lot it can be very difficult. At first crying is the main way your baby 'talks' to you. Even if you have other children, you need time to get to know your new baby, find out what they like and how you can meet their needs.

Colic

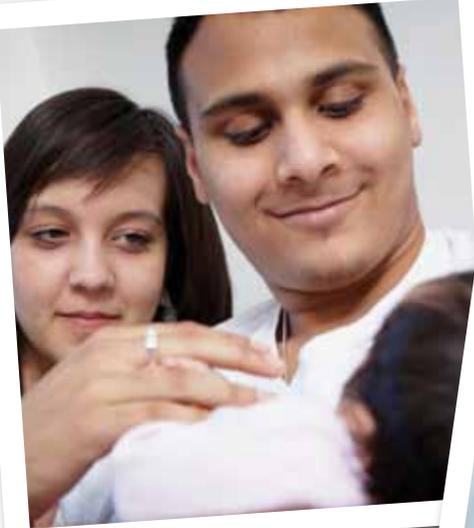
Not all health professionals agree that colic exists. It generally refers to excessive crying that affects babies under four months. It is not proven, but it may be caused by feeding problems, allergy or intolerances, over-stimulation or the baby's digestive or nervous system not being fully developed. If you think your baby has colic, ask your GP or health visitor for advice.

Babies cry for many reasons

They might be:

- too hot or cold
- in need of a nappy change
- upset and wanting a cuddle
- over-stimulated and needing to be laid down quietly
- bored and in need of company
- in pain because they're teething
- unwell – if crying seems unusual or is accompanied by a high temperature or a lack of appetite, always check with your GP or health visitor.





Top tips

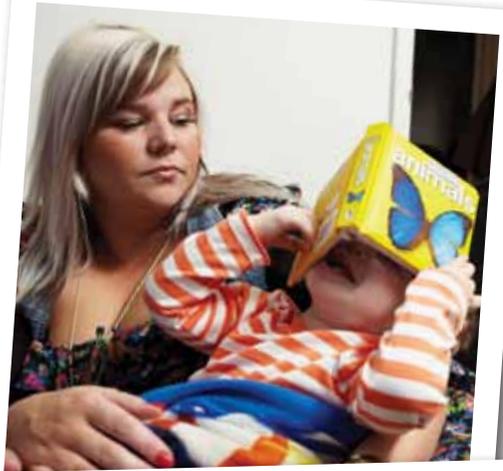
- All babies cry – it's their main language so it's not possible to stop it completely.
- Our brains are geared to respond to crying, so you'll pay attention to your baby's needs. It helps babies survive. Knowing this doesn't stop the stress – but it helps you manage it.
- Babies never cry to annoy you or because they are being naughty – they just need help sorting out how they feel.
- Remember: when your baby cries it isn't your fault or your baby's fault.
- It's impossible to spoil a newborn baby. The quicker you can respond in the early days, the more secure your baby will feel.
- To begin with, your baby's main reason for crying will probably be hunger. Feeding on demand is easiest in the early days – eventually your baby will settle into a routine.
- Babies whose cries are answered straight away when they're young, cry less as they get older.
- Knowing you will always come to care for them helps babies develop self-esteem and grow into confident children.

How to deal with difficult behaviour

You'll spend a lot of time with your baby. This can be challenging and it can sometimes be easy to see their behaviour as deliberately difficult.

Even though babies are individual people with their own feelings, it's important to remember they are simply not able to be 'naughty'. They can't think or act deliberately to 'get at you' or to upset you. Even as they get older, toddlers have short memories. Telling them not to do something today won't necessarily be remembered tomorrow.

No matter how upset you are, it's important never to shake, smack or squeeze a baby. It doesn't help and is dangerous. This behaviour can cause both emotional and physical harm to your baby. Shaking your baby can result in disability or death as babies have weak neck muscles and haven't developed the strength to protect their heavy heads. Research also shows that smacking doesn't work. It leads to harder smacks, and builds up resentment in the child. It teaches your baby that physical violence is the way to deal with strong emotions, and may lead to them being aggressive to other children.



Top tips as your baby gets older

- The best way to stop babies from doing something is to distract them. For instance, quickly offer them a toy and they'll happily give up the hairbrush you need.
- Give lots of praise, attention and rewards – including hugs and kisses – for behaviour you want to encourage. This also will help build the parent-child bond.
- Introduce 'no' gradually and keep it to a minimum so it doesn't lose its effect.
- Ignore behaviour you don't want repeated. Your child wants your attention, they won't understand that you're angry, and may think it's a game.
- Babies learn by example and copy behaviour from adults. If you don't want your child to behave aggressively it's important to avoid speaking or acting aggressively with them.
- Keep a sense of humour. The more you can see the funny side of the antics of an older baby, the happier everyone will be.
- Don't expect too much. It's normal for a six month old to mess about with food. It's normal for a baby to want to touch everything – it's how they learn. Make life easier now by moving dangerous or precious objects.
- Allow your children some control. Give them choices and allow some joint decisions. It makes your child feel important and listened to.
- If a punishment is necessary, then removal of privileges, 'time out', or natural consequences all work better than smacking.
- All parents behave in ways they regret at times. If it happens, say you are sorry, make up and try again. This teaches children a valuable lesson.



What if I am not a good parent?

Having a baby can bring back strong memories of your own childhood.

Perhaps your childhood was great and you are putting yourself under pressure by comparing yourself to your parents. Or you might have unhappy memories: your parents may not have done such a great job, and you're determined to do things differently. Maybe your family make up is different to your parents'.

Even if your parents didn't set the best example it's important – no matter how you feel, no matter how stressed – that you are always kind and caring to your baby. You should never smack, shake, scream or shout at your baby even if your parents did this to you (see pages 16-17).

The good news is that regardless of how your parents behaved there's no reason why you shouldn't be a great mum or dad.

Top tips

New parents don't always repeat the mistakes their parents made. And, if you had great parents, there is no need to compare yourself negatively. This is your chance to be exactly the kind of parent you want to be and your child wants and needs.

If it all gets too much, remember help is available. Talk to your partner, a family member, friends or a health professional. For more advice on who to speak to, turn to pages 18-19.

Getting things off your chest is really important. But you might find that parents, friends and family want to give you their advice and guidance. It's important to make your own decisions. Always act in a way which keeps your baby safe and makes you feel comfortable and confident in the way you parent your child.



Had enough? Can't cope?

Bringing up a baby can be tough and for some parents it becomes too much. Some parents may feel like ignoring, shouting or even physically harming their babies, but it is really important never to act on these feelings.

Bringing up a baby may be difficult for other reasons: you might be over tired, have other pressures in your life or find the change of lifestyle difficult. Some of the factors which may cause stress are listed on pages 6-9.

It is important that the home is a safe place for your baby. It can also be helpful to have daily routines in place for the baby in terms of feeding, sleeping and washing. This can help reduce pressure.

The NSPCC produces a leaflet called *Handle With Care*, which has information on how to cope with persistent crying and offers advice on where to get help.

Some new mothers feel like abandoning their babies. If you feel like this it is essential you ask for help.

If you feel you can't cope and you're in danger of taking it out on the baby, it's vital to get help. Asking for help is a positive step. See pages 18-19 for organisations you can talk to. Also try and speak to family and friends, you may be surprised to find out that they have experienced similar feelings.





If you feel that you might harm your baby:

- Try not to panic.
- Put the baby down gently somewhere safe like a cot or pram.
- Go into another room, and sit down for a few minutes, take a deep breath and let it out slowly (but never leave your baby alone in the house).
- Turn on the TV or radio if it helps to take your mind off the problem.
- If possible, ask a friend or relative to take over for a while. They will often be happy to help and flattered you asked.
- Once you feel calmer, go back to your baby.
- If you are feeling down about being a parent, remember your baby loves you and this is not their fault.

Further help

Contact your health visitor, GP, midwife or local child health clinic for advice on what's available for you in your local area.

The following contacts may be helpful. If you want a further list of people who can help with issues affecting new parents in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, please see our special online contacts page at www.nspcc.org.uk/helpforparents or call our information service on **0808 800 5000**.

NSPCC helpline (UK-wide)

Open 24 hours a day

Telephone: 0808 800 5000

Text: 88858 (for Channel Islands 07786 200001, standard network charges)

www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline

help@nspcc.org.uk

The NSPCC provides advice and support to adults who are worried about the safety or welfare of a child, including concerns about their own child. It's free and you don't have to say who you are. The NSPCC provides helpline services in several languages and also for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Cry-sis (UK-wide)

(Open seven days a week 9am – 10pm)

Helpline: 08451 228 669

www.cry-sis.org.uk

National helpline providing help and support to families with excessively crying, sleepless and demanding babies.

Family Lives (UK-wide)

Telephone: 0808 800 2222

www.familylives.org.uk

Advice and support about any family issue. Call, email, or live chat with a trained worker or share your story on their forums. Also provides face to face services in England only.

ParentLine Scotland

Telephone: 0800 0282233

www.Children1st.org.uk

Advice and support to parents, and any adult caring for a child, in Scotland.

Parenting Northern Ireland

Telephone: 0808 8010 722

www.parentingni.org

Advice and support to parents, and any adult caring for a child, in Northern Ireland.

Our parenting pack

If you've found this leaflet useful you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack.

They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like managing stress, encouraging better behaviour and when's the right time to leave your child home alone.

To request a pack, please email help@nspcc.org.uk or call **0808 800 5000**, mentioning the parenting pack or download copies from www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting



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