

# Child development: 0-3 months

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Remember, the information on this fact sheet should not be used or relied on as an alternative to professional care. If you have a particular problem, see your health care professional.

Coming into the world is a very big and scary adventure for babies. At first they don't know that you are there to comfort them and feed them and care for them. They only know when they feel comfortable and safe, or afraid, or hungry, or unsafe.

However, even from birth, they start to communicate with you 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 to know that the world is a welcoming place for them to be in, where their needs will be met and they will learn to feel safe and loved. Remember that for a new baby everything is new and scary at first, even a nappy (diaper) change.

## Social and emotional development

- Newborn babies can not understand what is happening to them.
- They do not know that they are people.

- They do not know who is feeding them, or who helps when they cry.
- They feel happy when they feed, but they do not know what 'happy' is.
- They cry when they are hungry or need to sleep, but they do not know that they are being cared for.

*The first and perhaps most important thing to understand about newborn babies is that they do not have any understanding of being a separate person inside their own skin, and certainly not a person in relationship with other people.*

- Newborn babies do not cry 'for attention' or to 'get at' their parents.

*A new baby in the first three months is not capable of responding to you with any conscious purpose. They have feelings of pleasure when they feed successfully or hear your soothing voice, feelings of pain when they feel hungry or frightened - but they don't actually know that fear is what they feel and neither do they understand there is a 'them' to feel it. So if they hear loud or*

*frightening noises for instance and feel fear, they have no way of knowing that they did not cause this themselves. In other words they think they are their environment - so it matters very much what their environment is like.*

- Because babies feel but are not yet able to think, they will pick up your feelings and become unhappy themselves if you are unhappy.

*This can be inconvenient because if you feel upset it will be impossible to hide it from your baby - she will think it's her feeling and respond as if it was! So, whenever you are tired and frazzled it's a rule that the baby is hard to settle!*

- Each baby is different, and each grows and develops along the pathway that is right for this baby.

*Every baby is very different. You have heard that before but it is really true and means that every baby has a different constitution and personality that may be very different from your own. They may be easygoing and placid or they may be shy and worried, or possess many other natural ways of responding that you will be getting to learn about and recognise over the early months.*

- The human face is the first and most important shape that they learn, and the sounds of human voices are very important to them, even though they do not understand them.

*Even shy and sleepy babies will want to take an interest in you - especially in*



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*your voice and your face. A big section of the human 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' and forming a close and warm relationship. Show them 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 and frequently need a rest.*

- Babies need to feel safe, that someone is looking after them. They often begin to smile at a familiar face by around 4 to 6 weeks, and will look at you carefully from around the same time.

### Physical development

- Although babies are ready to exist and grow out side of their mother's womb, most parts of their bodies are still immature.



*All new babies are very busy with their body. All brand new and never been used before - it takes the first three months to get the digestive system cranked up and running smoothly. You can tell by your baby's face that she is preoccupied a lot of the time with whatever is going on inside herself.*

- Since babies do not understand anything about what is happening around them they can become distressed if they are given too much to see or do.

*They are being bombarded by what is outside themselves and can easily feel overwhelmed by the stimulation of the diverse sounds, colours, shapes and tactile sensations in the world outside the womb. Sometimes it's just too much! Loud noises will frighten most babies in their first months but they are soothed by crooning and the sound of gentle voices and music they heard in the womb.*

### Crying

- Many babies who are under three months old cry a lot, especially in the late afternoon or evening.
- This crying, often called colic, seems in part due to being overwhelmed by all that is happening inside their body as well as outside (their environment).
- Have a look at the topics Crying baby for more ideas about how to help them settle.

**Note:** "Jiggling" babies is not a good way to help them settle and can be very scary or even painful for the baby even if he stops crying. **It is important to never shake a baby.** Have a look at the topic *Never shake a baby* for more information about this.

### Hearing and seeing

- Newborn babies can see but they can only clearly see things that are close by.
- They can hear, and they 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 cannot organise the visual images into meaningful shapes. In the first three months they are attracted by bright light, primary colours, stripes, dots and patterns.*

*The human face is the first 'object' they recognise by understanding that the eyes, nose and mouth form a face. Over the first three months they begin to recognise particular faces and other things [like their teddy bear] in their world. Stringing pictures of faces and simple toys above their cot will give them practice at organising shapes visually.*

### Using their bodies

- New babies 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.



*Infants in the first eight weeks have no control over their movements and all their physical activity is involuntary or reflex. Sucking, grasping, startling and standing are all reflexes. In their third month they will begin to watch their hands and feet wave in the air and also begin to wave their fist towards your face or some other desired object. They are beginning to get the idea that they have a body that moves, feels, has skin all round it and that they have some influence over what it does!*

- They start to work out how to lift their heads when lying on the tummy, and kick their legs by about eight weeks.

### Speech and language

- For the newborn, crying is the only means of communication and

different cries mean different things – hunger, pain, wet, cold, fear and loneliness.

- You will begin to recognise your own baby's different cries and the urgency of their need in the first few weeks. They have no understanding about time so all their needs are immediate and urgent.

*It is important to respond to your tiny baby as soon as practical so he begins to understand that you will be there for him when he calls out for you. This develops the feeling of security, which is very important.*

- By 7 or 8 weeks babies will begin to discover their voice and make cooing noises and vowel sounds.
- Even by about 8 weeks they will listen to what you say, then make noises back as they 'talk' to you.

### Activities for young babies

- make a face 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 gently
- lots of feeding and hopefully sleeping.

### Sleep

- Most babies will still need to be waking for a feed once or twice during the night.

- Some sleep through the night, but this is unusual.
- Some babies will resetttle when you touch and soothe them, but mostly young babies need the feed.
- See the topics '*Sleep - birth to 3 months*' and '*Safe sleep for babies and toddlers*'.

### Summary of development of a baby 0 to 3 months

#### Social-emotional

- Watches parent's face when being talked to, average 6 weeks, range 4 to 8 weeks.
- Smiles by 5-7 weeks.
- By 3 months baby is gurgling and laughing aloud.

#### Signs that suggest that there might be difficulty relating with the baby

- parent feels unable to meet the infants' needs most of the time
- parent sees the child in a negative way (as difficult), or is disappointed with child
- parent does not feel able to respond to the child
- child does not usually calm at least momentarily most of the time when picked up
- high pitched cry
- no social smile by 8 weeks

#### Motor skills, vision and hearing

- When cheek touched, turns to same side to suckle (from birth)
- Lifts head when prone (on tummy) average 6 weeks (4 to 8 weeks)
- Kicks legs vigorously by 2 months
- Arms, fingers and legs move spontaneously from flexed to extended to flexed positions
- Follows a moving light with eyes for a couple of seconds by 1 month

- Watches a moving face by 2-3 months
- Eyes move in unison most of the time by 6 weeks.

#### Signs that suggest that the child may have a developmental problem

- child unusually 'floppy' or stiff
- arm and leg on one side are obviously different in muscle tone or power to the other
- unusually 'good' head control (muscles stiff)
- fingers always held in tight fist
- not watching faces by 2-3 months
- not startling to noise
- not chuckling and smiling at 3 months

#### Daily activities

- Suckles well
- Sleep patterns vary greatly

#### Signs that suggest that the child may have a developmental problem

- difficulties with feeding beyond 'normal' range
- long periods of crying, persistent difficulties with settling baby
- exceptionally 'good' and placid.

#### Speech and Language

- Startled by loud sounds by 1 month
- Makes sounds other than crying by 2 months
- Begins listening to voices and making sounds when talked to by 7-8 weeks

#### Signs that suggest that the child may have a developmental problem

- not watching the face when being spoken to by 2-3 months

**Note:** All children are different and develop at different rates. So if your child does not do all the things in this topic, it may be because your child is working on some different area of his learning and development at present.

However, if your child is very different from other children, if you are worried about your child's development or if it seems to go backwards, you should seek the advice of a health professional. If there is anything wrong, getting in early will help. Otherwise it is good to have reassurance that your children are developing normally in their own unique way and to remember that what matters is to support them on moving forward from where they are now.

### References

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