

Guide

Newborn Baby Brain Infographic



PEDIATRIC CARE • SUPPORTING • PARENTING
A Program of ZERO TO THREE

HealthySteps Specialists (HS Specialists) play an important role in supporting parents of newborn babies. In addition to asking parents how they are adjusting and coping with early parenthood, lack of sleep, etc., ask them what they have learned from their baby so far. As you engage them in conversation about their baby, you can share information and offer support.

Our Baby Brain Infographic (right) offers an overview of crucial things parents need to know about their babies. This guide and the infographic are designed to be the Early Learning handout for the newborn and early visits, and to complement other resources: *The Quick Checks* (for you) and the *What's Up* (for parents). Here are the *8 Things Your Newborn Wants You to Know*, along with bullets offering additional, enriching information to parents on these topics:

1. All my experiences change the “foundation” of my brain and can help or hurt its growth.

- Babies’ brains are built from the ground up and, just like a house, need a strong foundation. This foundation is built through interactions between adult caregivers, other children, and a baby. All other skills are built upon this foundation: emotional well-being (how they feel about themselves), interpersonal (how they get along with others), problem-solving skills (such as listening, paying attention, and experimenting with solutions), and cognitive abilities (skills used to think, reason, and remember).

2. It takes me 4 to 8 weeks to learn how to smile. I’m not unhappy, I just can’t control my face muscles yet. But just wait, my smile will be amazing!

- Newborns’ smiles are initially reflexive, as opposed to social. Newborns are not angry or scowling—they just haven’t developed control of their muscles yet, including the ones in their face. This is important because new parents may misunderstand and fear that their baby doesn’t like them. A little information can provide big relief. And if parents say their newborn *has* smiled, just agree—no reason to rain on their parade.



3. I like it when we take turns “talking” back-and-forth, like a game of catch. I may turn away for a break, but I’ll come back.

- When babies coo it can be the beginning of a conversation. Tell parents they can look at their baby, smile, and talk back. It may feel silly at first but they can follow baby’s lead, cooing in the same way. Mom and Dad may enjoy knowing that their baby likely recognized their voices from the moment they were born.
- What babies are exposed to matters a great deal. Tell parents that talking to their baby is the best way to support brain development. Brain development occurs through the process of “serve and return.”

Parents should know that the communication needs to go both ways—that babies learn from the responses to them. Teach parents to follow baby's cues and go at their pace—every baby is different.

4. Don't worry—you can't spoil me! I can't soothe myself yet. But soothing me now teaches me to soothe myself.

- There is a widely accepted belief that picking up a crying baby will spoil them. Ask parents to share what they have heard about this.
- Many parents believe that crying is good for a baby's lungs. Ask them if they'd like to hear about research that says otherwise. Tell parents that unlike other animals, human babies are born completely dependent and quite helpless. For example, when a calf is born it can walk within two hours. Human babies take about 12 months to take their first steps.
- Babies require physical comfort, just as they need to be fed and cleaned. Picking up and holding a baby when they cry meets their need for safety and security. This responsiveness needs to begin at birth. Babies who are not responded to consistently may become clingy, needy, insecure, or falsely independent, as they learn they cannot count on anyone to meet their needs. Of course, not all babies like to be held all the time. Encourage parents to read and follow their baby's cues.
- When parents consistently meet baby's needs, babies learn that their caregivers are reliable and will keep them safe. This consistency builds confidence, security, and independence. Babies who are cared for and receive appropriate responses will learn to soothe themselves as they gradually acquire the skills needed to regulate their own emotions.

5. I learn from being with people, not screens. Please turn off the TV and put your phone away sometimes.

- Parents need to know that watching TV or videos is not recommended for babies under two-years-old. The screen doesn't respond to baby's reactions (not even *Dora the Explorer* or *My Baby Can Read*) and is not a good babysitter. Although babies will stare at the TV and appear completely engrossed, that doesn't mean they are learning. Also, if a TV is on, it is likely to distract other children and adults in the room, who might otherwise speak and play with the baby. Better to play music if background noise is desired. If there are older children in the home and baby watches their TV or videos, advise parents to

talk to their baby about what's happening on the screen. [Check out ZERO TO THREE's Screen Sense resources.](#)

- Most babies love to look at their mom's face best (dad's or other parent's face is their second favorite). Babies may get tired of this activity and require a break from the stimulation. They may look away, yawn or hiccup to indicate they need a break. Reassure parents that this is normal so they don't take it personally or chase the gaze.

6. It's hard to soothe me if you are stressed out. If you are upset, please put me down and take a short break.

- It can be exhausting, frustrating, and downright maddening to soothe a fussy baby. While encouraging parents to tend to their crying babies, it is important to balance this with meeting the parents' needs too. Normalize these feelings by encouraging parents to reach out for help from their partner, family or friends. Ask them to identify who can help, and frame asking for help as a strength, not a weakness. Warn parents to never shake a baby, to *put the baby down in a safe place* (such as a crib or playpen) and to take a break if they are alone and worn out.
- Don't assume that you will know if a parent is struggling with their mood or mental health—ask directly and conduct regular screenings. Check in with moms and dads regarding their moods and support systems. Normalize mood fluctuations, exhaustion, and initial anxiety in caring for newborns, but also *make sure all parents know the symptoms of Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders*:
 - a. Lasting feelings of depression and/or anxiety
 - b. Suicidality or violent ideation
 - c. Symptoms that interfere with daily functioning after the first month or so

7. Anger, violence, and too much stress aren't good for me. Even though I'm a baby, I will be changed by these experiences.

- Because infants' brains develop so quickly in the first few years of life, and this time period creates the foundation for later brain development, they are particularly vulnerable when exposed to anger, fear and aggression. This trauma can negatively impact their sensitive and growing brains and affect their health and behavior throughout their lives.



8. I take it all in when you look, smile, or yell at me. My brain never turns off, even when I'm asleep or it seems like I'm not paying attention.

- Encourage parents to be a narrator or sportscaster. Tell them it's OK if they don't know what to say; they can just describe what is going on around them (like a sports announcer on the radio). For example, "You love your bath, let's take the warm washcloth and sprinkle water over your shoulders. Doesn't that feel good?"
- Let parents know that research shows babies can be impacted by arguments happening in their homes even if they are asleep during the fighting.

Meeting with parents of newborns is a rewarding opportunity for HS Specialists. Many parents are humbled and overwhelmed by the birth of a baby and may be more open to support and feedback during this vulnerable time. In these early visits you can offer the ultimate parallel process as you give parents much needed reassurance and information around connecting with their baby. This rapport lays the foundation for a strong and respectful connection between parents and HS Specialists, *and* between parent and child.