

Introduction

Bringing home a newborn can be scary! Many mothers will have thoughts such as, "will I know what to do? Can I figure out what she needs? Can I make a mistake that could hurt her for life? Will I know if she was getting enough to eat or enough sleep? Will I be enough for her?" And the truth is, it will be hard, but you can do it. To help get you off on the right foot, we've outlined how to understand your baby—their needs, their personality, how they learn, and how to keep track of their development. And also, why taking great care of yourself is important to your baby's well-being.

Understanding Your Baby's Needs

Babies aren't born knowing how to talk, but they are born with the ability to communicate their needs. They do it by crying. Your baby's needs are pretty basic in the beginning: *milk, sleep, comfort, and love*. They fuss and cry when they are hungry, overly tired, overly stimulated, uncomfortable, sick, hurting, bored, or just needing to expel some pent-up energy. This is why responding to your newborn's cry is super important. The intensity of their cry communicates the intensity of their need.

It's frustrating and hard, sometimes, to understand what your baby's trying to tell you. You might eventually learn to identify what they need by the sound of their cry, but don't worry if you can't. Not all moms can tell the difference. But you can learn to interpret the need by narrowing down what it could be. It's like a process of elimination. Think about their needs. When was the last time they ate? Had a diaper change or nap? Is baby getting a lot of stimulation? Etc.

Start first by meeting the most pressing need and go from there. If they wake with a dirty diaper and are hungry, then change the diaper first and then feed them. If you want to try to distinguish between the different cries then look for a short, low-pitched cry that rises and falls for a hungry baby. An angry cry sounds stormier. A cry of pain or distress might sound like a long, high-pitched wail. As they grow, they will begin to communicate with babbling, smiles, pointing, and reaching for the things that interest them. Eventually, their babbling will turn into words, and understanding their needs will get a lot easier.

Understanding Your Baby's Personality

Newborns are born with their own distinct personalities that will determine how they respond to life. It will also influence how you parent them. Some babies are loud and active while others are quieter and more passive. Some are easy-going and laid back while others are more serious or high-strung. Some are more sensitive to stimulation while others thrive on it! No one personality trait is better than the other. They just make up who your baby is and how they learn.

Take some time to watch and get to know your baby and learn how they respond to new things. Observe how they handle different situations such as their first bath or being held by others. Knowing these things will help determine the way and how fast you introduce new things to your baby. When you parent your baby based on their personality, you lay the foundation for them to have more confidence, healthier relationships, and motivation. You will also have a better relationship with your child and help them to feel understood and respected.

Understanding How Your Baby Learns

Your newborn will learn about the world through their five senses. Through their sense of *smell and taste*, they immediately learn to tell breastmilk from other liquids. Through *hearing*, they'll know and be comforted by

your voice over anyone else's! They'll also listen for the familiar voices of their family members and be soothed by soft music. Through their sense of *touch*, they will learn about their environment. They will learn the different textures they touch, such as the soft clothes you dress them in, the prickly feel of grass, even the tickling breeze against their skin. And through their sense of *sight*, they recognize your face, and the faces of those they're close to.

Your baby learns so much when you just play with them. You don't need to conduct formal classes, nor do you need a college degree in child development—just have fun with them. Talking, walking, playing peek-a-boo, kissing them, singing to them, comforting them, and attending to their needs are all ways your baby learns.

Understanding Your Baby's Milestones

Developmental milestones are sets of skills your child learns as they grow and develop throughout childhood. These are things like rolling over, smiling, making eye contact, and more. Because every child is unique and develops at their own pace, experts have created age-ranges for when certain skills should be learned. Milestones help you and your provider keep track of whether your child is developing within those ranges or address any developmental delays early on to help your child catch up. Milestones are broken up by categories. Cognitive milestones track how well your baby's brain and thinking skills are developing. These are things like learning, problem-solving, and more. Language and communication milestones track your baby's ability to imitate sounds and facial expressions, babble, and eventually use words. Social and emotional milestones track skills such as smiling, interacting, playing, and more. And movement milestones track the big movements your child makes such as sitting up, rolling over, crawling, and walking. And the small movements, also called fine motor skills, such as grasping, pulling objects into their mouth, banging objects together, and more.

Understanding Taking Care of Yourself

Playing and interacting well with your baby won't be easy if you don't take good care of yourself. Every new mother feels exhausted, sore, and out of sorts emotionally. Labor, whether vaginal or by cesarean, is hard work, and your body needs time to recover and heal. You will be aching, uncomfortable, and tired. The first month is the hardest because while healing, you are also taking care of a baby who has plenty of needs. Just know that what you're feeling and experiencing is normal.

As your body adjusts back to its pre-pregnancy state, you will have times of moodiness as your hormones readjust. Moodiness can lead to depression if you aren't getting the sleep you need. Moodiness and lack of sleep can make caring for and bonding with your baby difficult. If you find that your moods don't lift, and you're not experiencing joyful moments with your baby, then see your medical provider. You could be experiencing postpartum depression, and your provider can help.

Getting rest, eating healthy, keeping track of your moods, getting out a little and connecting with those you're close to will help you feel better and take better care of your baby.

Resources:

1. <https://www.seattlechildrens.org/conditions/a-z/crying-baby-before-3-months-old/>
2. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/crying-colic/Pages/Responding-to-Your-Babys-Cries.aspx>
3. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Babys-Temperament.aspx>
4. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Parenting-Your-Infant.aspx>