

your new baby, your family and you

Understanding Childhood

is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into the child's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to make sense of their behaviour.

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Leaflets available free from:

www.understandingchildhood.net

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tel: 01303 261000

Pregnancy and the birth of a new baby may stir up hidden feelings, hopes and fears for mothers, fathers and other members of the family. These thoughts and feelings can take you by surprise. Knowing that this can happen, and understanding why, may help you to manage your own response and to give your baby a sense of security from the start.

Pregnancy and birth

You may have thoughts about what your new baby will be like and how he or she will make you feel. These thoughts are often related to your own past experience, culture or religion.

Both the physical and the emotional experience of birth is important for mother and baby. You may want someone to be with you at the birth who you feel safe with, maybe your partner or a close friend. Fathers may want to be present at the birth to create a close bond with their baby right from the start, as well as to support their partners.

Every mother approaches the birth with her own expectations and fears. You may find that you have mixed feelings about the birth. Joy at the birth and happiness at becoming a mother may be combined with a sense of resentment for the pain that your baby is perceived to have inflicted on you, or a sense of loss of the closeness of carrying the baby.

The influence of childhood memories

Every parent was once a child and has experienced the passionate emotions of a child themselves. The child they once were is still alive within every adult. Memories, dreams and imagination are an important part of our identity and of all our relationships, especially our relationship with our own children.



A new baby evokes memories of being a child and this affects how you feel and act. On the one hand this helps you know how your baby is feeling, but on the other hand these memories can make you vulnerable to powerful – and at times overwhelming – feelings towards your baby.

Having a baby brings back feelings and memories of being cared for by parents or other carers. You may have a fond image of them and wish to be like them with your own child.

But you may feel you did not grow up in a loving, safe family environment, and do not have an image of a loving parent. You may wonder how you can give your child what you never had yourself. Perhaps you can draw on different and more positive experiences in the past or the present to help you parent your baby.

Getting to know one another

During the first months your baby will be all-absorbing and demand your complete attention. Babies need their mothers to be preoccupied by them and to enjoy them.

Your baby needs you to be interested in their feelings as well as their physical care. Feeding and changing are a time for intimacy and tenderness between you and your baby – through looking, touching and playing. Gazing at one another, cooing and taking



turns in 'babbling' conversations all create a pleasurable bond between you and your baby.

Getting to know the rhythms of your babies needs and moods and how you respond to each other is important. The earliest rhythm is between sleeping and waking, hunger and being full, comfort and distress. Babies have different rhythms that may not match those of their mother, but you can learn to adapt to each other over time.

Feeding

Feeding is not only a time to eat and gain weight, but is also a time for looking, touching and playing. When babies 'latch on' with gusto, they are showing their passion for feeding.

Feeding by breast or bottle is also a time for babies to begin to experience some control over their own activities. With your help in the beginning, as in burping or staying awake long enough to eat, babies will gradually learn to manage themselves more.

Sleeping

Babies' sleeping patterns vary enormously. Babies differ in the way they fall asleep, and this is linked to their feelings about being separate and alone. Each baby is different in their mental states and moods on waking. Some are wide-awake and ready to meet the world, some are sleepy, jumpy or dreamy. Others seem to need their mother to hold them together until they are fully awake and alert.

You may feel anxious when your baby's sleeping pattern does not meet your expectations or your own needs. When you are tired, your baby's wakefulness may seem to be a sign that something is wrong. But most babies under about six months old wake up regularly during what an adult would think

of as night-time, and it is not unusual to have broken nights for much longer.

Communicating with your baby

Communication with your baby is a two-way process right from birth, and even before. Babies recognise their mother's voice before birth and her face within a few days of birth.

Babies are sensitive to their parents' state of mind and want to understand you just as much as you want to understand them.

Babies communicate their discomfort and distress in their facial expressions, body movement and crying. In the first weeks they rely totally on you to sort out their unhappiness and provide comfort, but it is not always easy to understand what your baby is trying to communicate to you.

- Think about your baby's needs: 'Are you too hot? ... is it nice being stroked?'
- Work out their likes and dislikes: 'I think you prefer to be held in this position.'
- Try to reflect on your baby's state of mind: 'Are you crying because you are lonely? ... does something hurt? ... are you frightened? ... do you need me to be here?'

Your baby's emotional development

Babies come into the world with strong emotions and are geared for development. Babies are social beings who develop emotionally and mentally through interaction with you and with other people. The early months are crucial for their emotional and mental growth and the child's early experiences will shape their development.

At first, a baby develops emotionally and physically from having all their needs met. The newborn baby cannot bear delay and needs you to respond very quickly. Security comes from not having to wait too long to be comforted, fed or cuddled.

As you think about your baby and attempt to understand the world with them, they will slowly develop the ability to think about themselves and others. Within a few months you are likely to find that your baby can tolerate some frustration. However, each baby is different and will take their own time to learn how to manage themselves so that they can be left for a little longer and you can have a bit of time to yourself.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

Crying and sleeping in the first months of life

Comforting and soothing your baby

Babies can experience very primitive and raw emotions that overwhelm them and are difficult for parents to tolerate. A crying baby, in particular, stirs up strong emotions in the adult.

All babies need your presence and reassurance, but some babies can be soothed more easily than others. Your ability to be sympathetic to your baby, and manage not to lose patience when they are fretful and miserable, even when you can't quite understand what they want, will help them learn to bear these difficult feelings.

It is easier to comfort a child when you are feeling good in yourself. At times you may feel interested and sympathetic, but at other times you are quite likely to feel exhausted and hostile. You may notice patterns in your own reactions – for instance, you may have less patience with your baby when you feel unsupported yourself.

When your baby does not settle in spite of all your efforts, you may feel hurt or worried. At times you may feel like blaming your baby for the emotional demands they make on you. But babies do not intend to be demanding – they cry because that is the only way they can express their physical or emotional needs. A newborn baby has no idea of 'playing up' or 'doing something' to your feelings – the baby can hardly grasp that you are a separate person from them.

If you are feeling overwhelmed or distressed, it may be important for both you and your baby's development to talk with a sympathetic adult – in particular, someone who can offer professional support such as your health visitor or GP. In some circumstances, you and your baby and your family may need the support of a specialist service.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets
Postnatal depression

You and your family

A new baby – especially the first baby – changes everything. Having a baby can both enrich your own and your family's life and also restrict what you might have wanted to do.

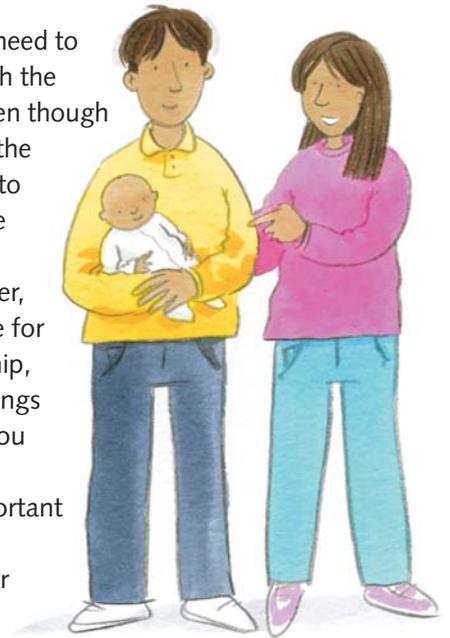
Your family will need to reorganise itself

around the new baby. Fathers need to form their own relationship with the baby, which may take time. Even though they welcome their new roles, the family may take time to adjust to the loss of the patterns they are familiar with.

If you are living with a partner, there will probably be less time for every aspect of your relationship, including talking and doing things together – and sex. Either of you may feel as if you have been replaced by the baby. It is important to find a way of talking to one another about these feelings or they may affect your relationship with your baby.

Brothers and sisters, or stepbrothers and sisters, may look forward to the new baby, but they will often also feel that they have lost some of your attention to the demanding infant. By acknowledging their resentment, you will help them to accept their angry and hurt feelings.

It's early days. With sympathy and patience, unsettled feelings towards the new baby can be resolved and loving family bonds will emerge.



Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

Sibling rivalry

Fathers

Grandparents and the extended family

Helpful points about your new baby and you

- A new baby awakens childhood memories and feelings that affects how you may act and feel
- The first two years are a crucial time for babies' emotional and mental growth
- Babies are born with strong emotions and are geared for development
- Babies need their mothers to be preoccupied by them and to enjoy them
- In the early weeks babies develop emotionally and physically from having all their needs met
- Security comes from not having to wait too long to be comforted
- Babies do not intend to be demanding – when they cry they are expressing a physical or emotional need
- Try to understand what your baby is feeling
- Your baby's behaviour is a way of communicating with you

Further help

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

Contacts

Cry-sis

Local support for families with excessively crying, sleepless and demanding babies.
Helpline 020 7404 5011, 9am–10pm, 7 days a week
Web www.cry-sis.org.uk

Meet-a-Mum Association (MAMA)

Support for people suffering from postnatal illness and their families.
Phone 0845 120 6162
Web www.mama.org.uk

Association for Postnatal Illness

Phone 020 7386 0868 (helpline)
Web www.apni.org

National Childbirth Trust

Phone (local rate) 0870 444 8707 (enquiry line)
Web www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com

Sure Start

There are a number of Sure Start programmes in the UK offering services and information for parents and children under four. To find if there is one in your area contact:

Phone 0870 0002288, or contact ChildcareLink below
Web www.surestart.gov.uk

YoungMinds Parents' Information Service

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person.
Freephone 0800 018 2138
Web www.youngminds.org.uk

Parentline

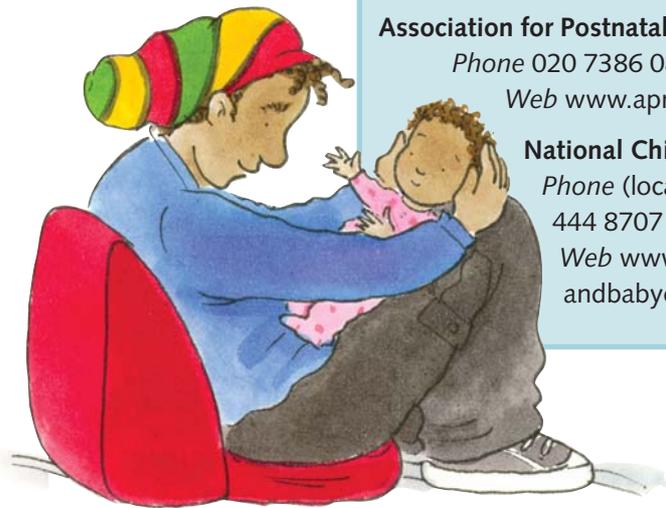
Help and advice for anyone looking after a child.
Freephone 0808 800 2222
Web www.parentlineplus.org.uk

ChildcareLink

Information about child care and early years services in your local area.
Freephone 0800 096 0296
Web www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Contact a Family

Help for parents and families who care for children with any disability or special need.
Freephone 0808 808 3555
Web www.cafamily.org.uk



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