

What Infants Need from Their Fathers



Over the course of the first few months of life, your infant will gradually gain control of her muscles, evolving from a little creature who can hardly lift her head to someone who can actually get her body to perform on demand. During her first year, your baby will also grow from a passive observer to a responsive, active participant in the world around her.

This is a time of discovery and growth for you, too. Many new dads have never held an infant before and worry that they'll do something wrong or somehow harm the baby. Some are unsure of what, exactly, their role should be. Others may feel excluded by the powerfully close bond between a nursing mom and baby. All of those feelings are perfectly reasonable. But the good news is that within a few months most of your fears and worries will have disappeared. You will gain confidence in your skills as a father, and take increasing pride and happiness in your baby's growth and development.

The first six months

During the first six months, what your baby needs from you is security and love. The best way to provide it is by spending as much time with your baby as you can, indoors or outside.

Here are some great ways you can get to know your baby and help him grow during the first six months:

- **Hold your baby.** Newborns love to be held and carried in your arms. If you go outside, strollers are good, but if your back can handle it, a front pack or “snuggly” gives you and your baby more body-to-body contact.
- **Talk to your baby.** He won't be able to understand a word you're saying, but he'll thrive on your attention. Explain everything you're doing as you're doing it—what's happening in the news, the kinds of cars and buildings you're passing as you go for a walk. It will soothe your baby, help him get to know the rhythm of language, and make him familiar with your unique voice.
- **Change your baby's diapers.** It doesn't sound like much fun, but this is a great time to interact with your baby one-on-one—to pat his belly, tickle his knees, kiss his tiny fingers. Your baby will need a diaper change more often than you probably suspect—an infant's skin is super-sensitive and shouldn't be exposed to a wet or dirty diaper for long—so there should be plenty of opportunities.
- **Stimulate your baby's senses.** Make sure he has a wide variety of things to look at—photos, mirrors, toys, people; expose him to lots of textures—smooth, soft, rough, bumpy; and be sure he has lots of different things to listen to—bells, whistles, your whole CD collection, and, most importantly, plenty of conversation.
- **Play with your baby, but gently.** Playing is one of the most important ways your baby learns. During the first six months play should be pretty simple: making funny, gentle sounds; clapping your baby's hands together softly; dancing with your baby in your arms. But remember that babies are fragile. Be sure to support your baby's head at all times and never, ever shake him. This can cause severe injuries and worse. And never throw your baby up in the air. Yes, your father may have done it to you, but he shouldn't have. It looks like fun but can be extremely dangerous.
- **Read.** At this age, you can read just about anything to your baby, from Moby Dick to the installation guide to your dishwasher. The goal isn't to educate, it's to get your baby used to the sound of language and a peaceful activity that he can enjoy forever. The long-term benefits of reading to your baby are clear: research shows that children whose parents read to them regularly have bigger vocabularies, are able to sit still for longer periods of time, and have fewer problems learning to read than children who don't have the same exposure to books. Look for books with simple, brightly colored pictures. Nursery rhymes are good, too.



■ **Help your partner breastfeed.** No, that's not a typo. Dads play a very important role in breastfeeding. Breast milk provides big health benefits to a baby, and by supporting your partner's breastfeeding, you are doing your baby a big favor. But as natural as breastfeeding seems, a lot of women experience problems and are tempted to give up. This is where you come in. By encouraging your partner, telling her what a great job she's doing, making her comfortable, bringing her water to drink while she's nursing, and getting her any outside help she needs, you're giving her the confidence and support she needs to get over the hard parts.

The Second Six Months

In the second half of the first year, your baby will learn to crawl, sit up, and maybe even take a step or two (probably holding on to something). Here's how to stay involved at this stage:

■ **Keep playing.** Although our society doesn't value play as much as it values some other parent-baby interactions—such as feeding and diaper changing—play is critical to your baby's development. It's also one of the primary ways dads interact with their young children. Babies who are played with a lot, especially by their fathers, do better physically, socially and intellectually.

To help your baby's small-motor skills, play lots of games that involve picking up objects, organizing them, stacking, nesting, pouring, tearing, crinkling, and crushing. Puzzles are especially good starting at around a year, but get only the kind that have separate holes for each piece to fit in. (Each piece should also have a peg for easy lifting.) For bigger muscle development, try pushing balls back and forth, playing hide and seek, and chasing each other around the floor on your knees. And for building hand-eye coordination, try spilling a

bunch of Cheerios on your baby's highchair tray and letting her pick them up. Whether she eats them or puts them back in the bowl is up to her.

Don't spend a lot of money on fancy toys. For babies this age, the simpler the better. Empty cardboard boxes, plastic bowls and leftover containers, and an old hat can keep your baby busy for a long time. Hiding and finding games, such as looking for a favorite toy that you've hidden under a napkin, reinforce the important notion that things exist even when you can't see them.



*Stay involved
and read to
yourself, too!*

Stay away from anything made of foam (it's too easy to chew off pieces) or that might shred, anything small enough to swallow, and things that have detachable parts, strings, ribbons, or elastic—they're all potential choking hazards.

■ **Keep reading.** At around seven months, your baby's grabbing and tearing are likely to be more purposeful, and she may try now and then to turn the page herself. By ten months, she may follow a character from one page to the next. At a year, she'll not only be able to turn one page of her book at a time, but she'll start to be able to answer questions like, "What does the ducky say?" The best reading position for your baby is on your lap with her back to your chest. Hold the book with your arms around her and read from over her shoulder.

- **Read to yourself, too.** One of the best ways to stay involved at this stage is to learn everything you possibly can about how you, your partner, and your baby are developing psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Parenting magazines, books on parenting and child development, and brochures that you can pick up at your pediatrician's office will help you learn and understand.
- **Keep playing music.** Sing whenever and wherever you can. And don't worry about being in tune—your baby doesn't care—or about knowing the words. Nonsense syllables—dum-dee-dum kinds of things—are just as good. Listen to music you like. Your enthusiasm will be contagious.
- **Keep talking.** There's plenty of evidence that talking to your baby can have some very positive long-term effects on her language development and on her social development, too. So when you're with your baby, identify everything you can. Tell her what you're doing, where you're going, what's going on outside, what the weather's like, who won last night's baseball games, and so on.
- **Establish regular routines.** A schedule of eating, reading, going out, and sleeping at pretty much the same time every day will help build your baby's sense of confidence and security, and help keep your family life calmer.
- **Keep on holding, hugging, and cuddling your baby, and be sure to tell her often that you love her.** Even if she doesn't understand everything you're saying, your smiles and your voice mean a lot more to her than you think.
- **Take breaks.** Don't feel that you have to entertain your baby all the time. Letting your baby have some time to play by herself is important to her development, too. As long as you're close enough to see her and respond quickly if she needs you, it doesn't mean you're being neglectful. By giving your baby quiet time to invent her own games or practice alone the things she does with you, you're teaching her that she can satisfy at least some of her needs on her own.
- **Childproofing.** Once your baby can move around by herself, her mission in life will be to locate—and race you to—the most dangerous, life-threatening things in your home. So if you haven't already begun the never-ending process of childproofing your house, get started now. Begin by getting down on your hands and knees and looking at the world from your baby's perspective. Taking care of those pesky electrical cords, covering up outlets, and putting locks on low drawers and cabinets is only the beginning. Crawl from room to room and you'll be amazed at the number of heavy objects that can be pulled down by little hands and the endless variety of things there are to smack one's head against if you're only two feet tall and not so steady on your feet. Supervision is the best way to prevent injuries, in the home and out, but even the most watchful parents can't keep kids completely out of harm's way every second of the day.



The Payoff

As you enter this new stage of life as a family, staying focused on what really matters will help you through the rough spots, especially in the first few months. It may bother you that you didn't have time to make the bed, but overall, that's not too important. The more flexible you can be about what gets done when, the more relaxed and in control you'll feel.

Being a new parent is demanding—and tiring, too. But if you take the time to join in your baby's life, from diapering to reading to that special domain for dads—lots of play time—you'll be rewarded every day. You will watch your baby grow from a tiny bundle in diapers to a small person with a personality and skills all his own who relies on you to help make his life complete.

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