

Respecting Your Baby

Babies are brilliant, sensitive, inexperienced people. They learn rapidly, from before birth, even though they don't speak our language. In respecting your baby's body and abilities, you set the stage for a lifetime of mutual respect.

Mouth Your baby senses the world largely through her mouth. If her very first mouth experience feels like an assault (vigorous suctioning, for instance, or a forceful finger or bottle), she may not willingly draw a breast into it for some time. Ask her permission before putting anything in her mouth, and respect her wishes if her mouth doesn't open.

Appetite When a newborn expresses a need to suck, she's saying she wants food, not a pacifier. Respect her ability to know her own appetite and thirst. If you feel she's never satisfied, check with a breastfeeding specialist.

Ears Before you kiss your baby directly on his ear, have someone kiss you on yours, so you can see what the volume is like.

Hands Human hands are especially sensitive. If a baby's hands are washed immediately after birth, he loses the smell and taste he has always known, and may not nurse as readily. If his hands are kept in mittens "to protect his face", he's unable to comfort himself with them or to make normal connections with his world, and may not feed well.

Crying Some babies cry for reasons we just can't figure out. If that's the case, your baby will certainly appreciate being held while you try to help. But most crying is simply for lack of nursing or holding. Vigorous crying is hard on a baby's heart and does nothing to "exercise his lungs". Respect your own instincts, and respond to cries.

Penis If you want to circumcise your son for other than religious reasons, consider that you will be permanently removing what would become more than 5 square inches of highly sensitive skin from someone else's body, without his permission. Circumcision can be performed at his own request later, though very few men with an intact foreskin want to lose it. The health risks of an intact foreskin are no greater than the health risks of removing it.

Diaper changes and baths If your baby becomes distressed midway, consider whether it's more important to finish the job uninterrupted or to take a few minutes to nurse or console her. Soon changes and baths will be among her favorite activities. Until then, imagine what it would be like if you cried for rescue and no one seemed to listen.

Skin Our skin is our largest organ. Babies love to feel their bare skin against their parents' bare skin. With a blanket spread over the two of you, your baby will have more effective warmth and more stable "vital signs" than in the most expensive hospital warming unit.

Play Your baby is most open to play during those "quiet alert" times when he's neither hungry nor sleepy. Mimic his own expressions. Make a face at him, slowly and several times, and he may attempt the same one back - even to sticking out his tongue. Some babies remember those "face games" for months - opening their mouth wide, for instance, for a lactation consultant whom they haven't seen since their earliest days. Babies are learning machines! But they tire quickly. When your baby looks away, yawns, or puts his hands up stiffly, playtime is over and the respectful player lets him snuggle in-arms and enjoy a snack.

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