

# Sleep and settling for early childhood

## Factsheet 7: Preventing sleep concerns: babies 0–6 months



## Summary

- Bonding or attachment with your baby is important. It will help your baby develop and help you to understand your baby and their cues.
- For some parents, it may take time to bond with your baby, this is normal.
- Newborns and babies aged from birth to six months have not yet learned to settle by themselves, so it is common for them to be unsettled. They usually need your help to settle and go back to sleep.
- Babies usually need a cue to tell them it is time to go to sleep. This is usually something in their external environment such as swaddling or wrapping, a bath, massage or a room with dim lighting.
- A bedtime routine is predictable and calming for your baby and can prevent sleep problems.

## Getting to know your baby

Bonding, or attachment, with your baby is important. It will help your baby develop and help you to understand your baby and their cues.

Babies feel safe and loved when you respond to their needs.

You can help your baby develop by:

- touching
- cuddling
- talking
- singing
- smiling
- looking into their eyes.

You may feel an overwhelming sense of love for your baby and develop an instant strong connection.

Further information on getting to know your baby can be found on the Raising Children's website [bonding with newborns](https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/connecting-communicating/bonding/bonding-newborns) < <https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/connecting-communicating/bonding/bonding-newborns>>.

On the Raising Children's website there is a short video on how dads can bond with their baby [bonding with babies for dads](https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/videos/bonding-for-dads) < [https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/videos/bonding-for-dads?gclid=EAlalQobChMlidKPwobD5QIV1ZGPCCh30GAZaEAAYASAAEgl9YvD\\_BwE](https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/videos/bonding-for-dads?gclid=EAlalQobChMlidKPwobD5QIV1ZGPCCh30GAZaEAAYASAAEgl9YvD_BwE)>.

## What if I can't bond with my baby?

For some parents it takes time to bond with their baby, that is normal too. If you are concerned that you are not connecting with your baby, speak to your maternal and child health nurse or your doctor.

Being a parent doesn't come naturally for most people. Adjusting to parenthood can look very different depending on whether you are single, in a relationship or a new mum, dad or partner. For instance, in the early days, some

new dads and partners may feel left out because they are not feeding or nursing their newborn, but there are other ways to bond with your baby, such as bathing, reading a story, changing nappies or taking your baby for a stroll while your partner is catching up on sleep.

Remember, no one is expected to be an expert and bonding with your baby it is really a matter of trial and error.

Try to approach parenthood as a team effort. Single parents can call on family and friends to share the responsibilities, so your child builds important connections with others around them.

If you are concerned that you are not connecting with your baby, speak to your maternal and child health nurse or doctor.

If you are experiencing relationship difficulties, consider seeking the help of a counsellor. With the right support, things can often improve.

## Responsive settling

Newborns aged birth to three months have not yet learned to settle by themselves. With your help they will learn to self-settle.

It's common for them to be unsettled.

They wake often overnight between sleep cycles and when they need to be fed or changed.

They usually need your help to settle and go back to sleep. We call this responsive settling.

Each baby is different. Your baby's ability to settle comes down to their individual temperament.

Some babies are very difficult to settle. This can be stressful and upsetting. Your self-care is important, if you need a break, place your baby in their cot and walk for a few minutes. To find out more about your self-care, download Factsheet 14: Selfcare for parents and caregivers from the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health).  
<<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

Things you can do to help settle your baby include:

- gently touching your baby, such as patting or stroking your baby in their cot.
- using gentle shushing noises, settling music or white noise.
- check they do not need a nappy change
- check they are not too hot or too cold
- check it hasn't been longer than two to three hours since their last feed.

If one approach doesn't work after five minutes, move on to a different approach.

Continue with the approach until the baby is quiet, but not asleep.

Put your baby in their cot when they are tired but still awake.

This helps your baby learn to settle by themselves and stops them from relying on these approaches to get to sleep.

## Tired signs

When your baby is tired, they show signs or cues that they are tired. If you learn to recognise these signs, you can encourage your baby to go to sleep at the right time.

Newborns from birth - three months might start showing tired signs after 30 minutes of being awake.

Baby's from three - six months, they might be tired after 1.5 to 3 hours of being awake.

Tired signs for these age groups can include:

- jerky movement

- frowning
- clenching of fists
- yawning
- staring
- poor eye contact
- fluttering of eyelids
- rubbing eyes
- sucking on fingers
- back arching, grizzling and crying, which are late signs.

Some of these signs may mean your baby is bored and they settle with a change of environment.

However, if your baby has been awake for longer than 30 minutes (newborn) or longer than 90 minutes (three - six months), they are likely to be tired.

## Creating positive sleep routines and environments

Routines and environments play a big part in helping babies get to sleep.

Babies need a cue to tell them it is time to go to sleep. This is usually something in their external environment.

It could be a dark room, being swaddled or wrapped (if they cannot yet roll over).

For more information on how to safely swaddle or wrap your baby, go to the Red Nose [safe wrapping guide](https://rednose.org.au/resources/education) <<https://rednose.org.au/resources/education>>.

Some things like cuddling or holding your baby until they fall asleep might be difficult to keep doing for the long term, as it may create a negative sleep association for your baby. They may only be able to fall asleep if they are cuddled or held. It's up to you to decide whether you can maintain these types of routines.

### Sleep environment

Some things you can do to create a good sleep environment for your baby include:

- reducing stimulation around your baby – for example, sit in a quiet room with dim lighting
- swaddling or wrapping your baby (if they cannot yet roll over)
- giving your baby a bath at night
- giving your baby a gentle massage
- creating a pre-sleeping routine, like singing lullabies.

### Bedtime routines

Bedtime routines help your baby develop positive sleep patterns and behaviour and can prevent sleep problems.

Regular daytime and bedtime routines can help your baby to fall asleep and stay asleep. They let your baby know that sleep is coming.

Bedtime routines are predictable and calming for your baby.

Some things you can do include:

- keeping the routine short – no more than 15 to 30 minutes
- using the same relaxing activities before bed every day, such as a warm bath, a massage, reading stories or singing lullabies
- creating a calm, quiet, dark and warm environment, with no television.

Use regular bed times, nap times and wake times to help your baby develop a good sleep–wake rhythm.

## Feed, play, sleep

It's good to keep using the same sleep routine as your baby grows and develops.

**Feed, play, sleep** is a daytime routine you can use for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers to establish a positive sleep pattern and behaviour.

- **Feed** your child as appropriate for their age.
- Encourage **play** time during the day. Examples of play time for babies include:
  - singing
  - gently talking to your baby
  - reading
  - floor time
  - sitting in a pram outside.
- Watch for the first **tired signs** and then put your baby to bed.

**Feed, play, sleep** is most effective if done throughout the day. You should reduce play at night and provide a quiet and dim environment so that your baby understands the difference between day and night.

**Feeding** is a very important part of the routine. With a healthy and adequate diet, your baby will have energy for play, which in turn encourages positive sleep behaviours.

## Self-settling

Self-settling is when your baby learns to settle and fall asleep by themselves.

If you learn how to do these strategies, your baby learn how to self-settle from three months of age by having positive sleep routines and environments.

When your baby learns to self-settle, they don't need to rely on you to settle them.

They can get back to sleep by themselves if they wake overnight (except when they need to feed).

Self-settling may help your baby to sleep for longer periods at night.

To help your baby learn to self-settle you can:

- make sure the room is dark and quiet
- swaddle or wrap your baby (if they cannot yet roll over)
- put your baby into their cot when they are tired but still awake. This helps them learn to associate being in bed with settling and falling asleep.

If your baby still does not settle, you can:

- try going for a walk in the pram
- give your baby a bath or massage
- cuddle or hold your baby in your arms

## Helping your baby to sleep safely

Many parents worry about their baby's risk of sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI). This is when a baby dies suddenly and unexpectedly. Although it can happen at any time SUDI often occurs during sleep.

To help your baby sleep safely follow these simple rules from Red Nose:

- sleep baby on their back
- keep their head and face uncovered
- ensure baby's environment is smoke free
- have a safe sleep environment

- sleep baby in a safe cot in your room
- breastfeed

Although SUDI is declining in Australia, it is the major cause of unexpected death in babies aged between four weeks and 12 months.

For more information on safe sleeping we recommend that you read the Red Nose [safe sleep brochure](https://rednose.org.au/resources/education) <<https://rednose.org.au/resources/education>>.

## Sharing a sleep surface

A considerable proportion of SUDI occurs when parents or caregivers share a sleep surface with a baby. This is also called co-sleeping or bed-sharing.

It is recommended by Red Nose that the safest place for baby to sleep is in their own cot next to your bed for the first six to 12 months of life.

Red Nose has a [safer co-sleeping guide](https://rednose.org.au/resources/education) for parents that has tips for safer co-sleeping. <<https://rednose.org.au/resources/education>>

## Sleep and settling concerns

Waking and settling issues are very normal for newborns and babies less than six months of age. As a new parent it is important that you look after your health and wellbeing. To find out more about your self-care, download Factsheet 14: Selfcare for parents and caregivers from the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

Your newborn may wake frequently during the night to feed and they may need help from you to settle back to sleep.

It is not uncommon for newborns and baby's to not sleep through the night until around one year of age.

If you are concerned about your baby's sleep and settling, speak to your maternal and child health nurse, doctor or call the Maternal and Child Health Line on Tel: 13 22 29.

To receive this form in an accessible format [email Maternal and Child Health and Parenting](mailto:MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <[MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au)>.

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Available at the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

This factsheet is based on research undertaken by KPMG on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services. The research included a comprehensive overview of contemporary research, and evidence-based approaches and interventions for sleep and settling in early childhood. It considered developmentally appropriate strategies and cultural diversity. Download the full research report from the [MCH Service webpage](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health) <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health>>.