

BABY WATCHING:

Making sense of your baby



Baby watching: Making sense of your baby

People often say they wish their baby had come with an instruction manual but it's worth taking time, just a few minutes when you can, to watch closely and gradually become familiar with what your baby is like. Getting to know their sleep and wake states will help you. If you are pregnant now, baby watch when you are out and about to see what sleep or wake state babies are in! Young babies often move quickly from sleep to wake states – notice your own baby's pattern and think how they may feel in each state.

Watch an overview of baby states and find out more: <https://youtu.be/igBdGANCHE8>. The following videos, together with other videos to help you to get to know your baby, can be located on the [Getting to know your baby](#) page on the Association of Infant Mental Health website.



Deep Sleep

In a deep sleep your baby will:

- Lie still with eyes closed
- Breathe steadily and regularly
- Be hard to wake up
- Sometimes make jerky or sucking movements.

What's it like to be in a deep sleep? Babies in deep sleep need rest and a comfortable and, if possible, familiar place to sleep.

Please see: <https://youtu.be/yUzZlo-VMSk>



Light Sleep

In a light sleep your baby will:

- Have their eyelids closed but they may flutter
- Make rapid eye movements under the lids
- Make sucking or face movements
- May make a sleep smile
- Wake more easily.

Think how you feel in a light sleep and how you might want to be treated. Your baby needs time to wake or drop back into a deep sleep.

Please see: <https://youtu.be/xP7ulHzGbro>



Drowsy

In the drowsy state your baby will:

- Have heavy-lidded eyes which may flutter or look glazed
- Make smooth body movements but may startle suddenly. Think how you feel in the drowsy state just before waking.

Your baby may enjoy a cuddle while they wake or they may want to fall back to sleep.

Please see: https://youtu.be/Yw9-1vA_iPg



Quiet Alert

In the quiet alert state your baby is ready for interaction. Your baby will:

- Be wide eyed with a bright face and a still body
- Be interested in your face and voice
- Focus and be interested in what's going on.

This is the best time to play and interact with your baby.

In the quiet alert state your baby may like to take some time to watch before engaging. Give lots of time and watch for baby's cues.

Please see: https://youtu.be/uE6q_5COeIA



Unsettled / active alert

In the active alert / unsettled state your baby may:

- Fuss and be unsettled
- Move, wriggle and squirm a lot
- Make thrashing movements with arms and legs
- Be especially sensitive to loud noises and light.

Think how you feel when you are unsettled. Baby is likely to need a change of pace. They may need a feed or just a slowing down because it is all too much.

Please see: <https://youtu.be/0dB5IDqSS0Y>



Crying

In the crying state your baby may:

- Cry intensely and be difficult to comfort
- Change colour and yell.

Babies cry for many reasons. Although it can be difficult to be on the receiving end of crying, your baby is not crying to 'get at you'. It is how the baby is trying to help you work out what is going on for them. They may be tired, hungry, thirsty, too hot or cold, bored, scared, lonely or ill. Soon you will be able to tell one cry from another and this helps you know what to do. Think how your baby likes to soothe. Do they have a favourite cuddling position? Have a look at sleeping and soothing.

Please see: https://youtu.be/4k09W6n_PgA

Getting to know your baby

Getting to know your new baby takes time and by watching their signals and cues you can begin to work out what it is they like and don't like and what they need.

What are baby cues?

Baby's reactions may look random but every movement may be a cue or communication. For example, squirming or pulling away may be a sign that he doesn't like having his face wiped. He may be still, quiet and watch intently if something interests him.

Babies can't think like older children, but they do experience strong feelings and bodily sensations. They are very sensitive to their environment, the people around them, the sounds, smells and emotions in the room. Just think about the urgency in a newborn baby's hunger cry! It can feel as if his world is falling apart. As baby gets older he will feel safer because he knows his needs will be met and then he will be able to wait for a short time.

Taking some time to just to watch and wonder

The key to understanding baby's language is taking the time to watch. In the busy rush of everyday life, it is easy to miss baby's subtle cues.

Every now and again take a little time to just watch your baby's behaviour and wonder what is going on for him? What might he be feeling behind the behaviour that you can see? Babies are learning all the time and love hearing your voice, so wonder out loud! Sharing your thoughts out loud by saying things like *"I am just wondering if you are hungry or you need an extra cuddle?"* will convey the feeling to baby that you are trying to work it out.

Use the sleep wake / states to give you confidence

Knowing what sleep or wake state your baby is in will really help you puzzle out what he needs. You will notice he can only do things when he is in the 'right' state so, for example, he won't want to feed when he is in the drowsy state, and he won't want to play when he is crying. He will only want to smile and coo when he is in the quiet alert state.

Born ready to connect

We are all born to relate to one another and, right from birth, baby will be able to recognise your voice and he will enjoy fleetingly looking at your face and, after a few weeks, he will gaze for longer. Parents and babies can't be connected all the time though! That would be overwhelming for baby and exhausting for you. Baby will connect for a short time – then need to look away. Give him time to engage again when he is ready. Being connected is not all about face-to-face interaction though.

Touch and movement are important and being held close helps baby feel safe.

Getting the pace right

Every baby is different and each day baby will have his own pattern and will move through the sleep wake states many times. Watching baby's cues and signals will help you to get the pace right so you can meet his needs more easily. This does take time though – it doesn't all happen straightaway and some babies do cry a lot at first.

Getting the interaction right for your baby at different times of the day

.....

Start by thinking what sleep/wake state your baby is in.

Then take another few seconds and ask yourself the following questions:

Is this interaction too much for my baby at this time?

Babies naturally move from having fun to finding it all too much.

Watch for signs:

- Baby might look away for a time. Hold him so he can look away when he wants. Give him time to look away - he will either come back to look again or may move into a different sleep/wake state.
- Don't be disappointed if he looks away - it is the way babies manage their emotional arousal.
- When it is all too much, babies sometimes sneeze, yawn, hiccup, bring up a little milk, their skin tone pales or deepens because they need to change state.

Some babies get overwhelmed quickly so slow the pace, watch and wait for baby's cues before responding.



Is this interaction too little for my baby at this time?

Some babies may make fewer demands and may need more attention and take time to engage in play:

- Watch your baby carefully and notice what special things he likes.
- Give lots of cuddles and notice if he has a favourite cuddling position.
- Talk to him slowly and warmly, and make eye contact and watch, wait and notice his responses.
- Don't rush him, give him your warmth and attention while he discovers things himself.
- Try singing along with music or learn some nursery rhymes and watch his reactions.
- At first he will enjoy just being close to you and having time to watch your face.
- When he is a few months old he will enjoy sitting on your knee and looking at a baby picture book with you.
- Watch his responses and wonder what he might be feeling.

Think how you are feeling. It's harder to engage in fun interactions if you are feeling low. Don't try to battle through on your own. Tell your health visitor or doctor who will make sure you get some support.



Is this interaction just right for my baby at this time?

Only a small part of interaction is face-to-face (see quiet alert state). Babies feel safe by being against your body, feeling your warmth and hearing your heartbeat and gentle voice. When baby is in the quiet alert state:

- Find a comfortable position for you both and give him time and enough space to gaze at your face. The distance from your face to your lap is usually perfect!
- Wait until baby looks interested then speak slowly and warmly.
- Take a very short turn and watch and wait for your baby's response – at first he will watch and when he is a few weeks old he will vocalise back, while you watch and wait.
- Baby will become skilled at conversational turn taking – learning a very important skill about how we take turns in conversation – so give him lots of time.
- Don't feel disappointed when baby needs to look away – it is one way he can manage his emotional arousal. Give time for baby to look again when they are ready. Talk to your health visitor about interactions with your baby.





Produced by the Institute of Health Visiting.

The content described within this document is considered the intellectual property of the Institute of Health Visiting and is subject to copyright.

©Institute of Health Visiting

Acknowledgement

The Institute of Health Visiting would like to thank Dr Angela Underdown, iHV Infant Mental Health Specialist Advisor, who provided the content for this booklet.

Institute of Health Visiting

A Registered Charity Number 1149745

c/o Royal Society of Public Health, John Snow House, 59 Mansell Street, London E1 8AN

Telephone: +44 (0) 207 265 7352 | Email: info@ihv.org.uk

www.ihv.org.uk