

Good ways to settle babies under six months: a parent's guide

This fact sheet will help you:

- settle your new baby
- cope with crying
- know where to get help

This fact sheet uses 'he' or 'him' to refer to your baby. Change to suit your child's sex.

Understanding your new baby

Imagine what it's like to be a new baby surrounded by unfamiliar sights and sounds. Young babies are aware of things that happen around them. To a baby, this new world is sometimes scary. Babies need their parents to help them feel safe and content.

- When babies need something (comfort, food, a dry nappy, for instance,) they should have it as soon as possible. Responding to babies shows them they are safe and loved. Feeling safe and loved is important for their development. Babies who have loving and caring relationships early on tend to cope better with problems and stress when they're older.
- Go to your baby if he cries. Babies won't become 'spoilt' if you go to them when they cry. Young babies tend to cry less and be happier if you don't keep them waiting.
- Cuddle and play with your baby. Keep him close. Spending time together helps the baby and you get to know one another. Getting to know your baby helps you understand him better and enjoy him more.

Settling babies

There are different ways to settle babies. You need to find a way that works for your baby and for you. Settling techniques may not always send the baby to sleep straight away. Instead, settling aims to make babies feel relaxed enough to go to sleep by themselves. Eventually your baby will be able to go to sleep without needing to be settled first.

Some things that make settling easier are:

- Staying calm (though this is sometimes easier said than done).
- Settling your baby in a quiet place away from other people or distractions.
- Using the same way of settling each time, if possible. When the same familiar things happen before bedtime, the baby learns that it's time to sleep. However, if one method doesn't work, you may need to try another.
- Wrapping the baby in a light cotton sheet. This helps some babies in the first few months. Wrap the baby so that he can still move his hands to his face for comfort.

For Arabic version only:

- If you use belly wraps to settle the baby use only a small piece of linen to cover the baby's stomach and keep him warm, make sure he can still move around freely.

Learn the signs that mean your baby is tired. You can then start settling the baby before he gets overtired. Overtired babies can be irritable and harder to settle. 'Tired' signs to look for are:

- yawning
- making jerking movements
- clenching fists
- fretting
- grimacing
- pulling at the ears
- rubbing eyes
- increased physical activity

Some settling methods to try:

Comfort settling

Change the baby's nappy and put him at the foot of the bed on his back. Leave the room if the baby is quiet but return straight away if the baby cries. Try rocking, patting or stroking the baby without taking him out of bed. If this doesn't work pick up and hold the baby until he calms down. Some babies in their first weeks need a short breast-feed or, if bottle-fed, a little cooled water after it has been boiled. The baby may fall asleep in your arms. Put the baby back into bed. It's okay to leave if the baby is only fretting a little, but if he sounds distressed, continue comforting until the baby is calm

Settling in your arms

Some babies like to fall asleep in their parent's arms. Gentle rocking, patting or talking or singing softly can help.

What if the baby hasn't settled?

You can let the baby suck on its fist or fingers, or try a dummy – If you use a dummy don't place it in your own mouth or dip it in sweeteners such as honey.

Getting into a routine.

A routine makes life with a new baby less chaotic. It's also good for babies when the same things happen at around the same time every day. It helps them feel secure.

A routine doesn't mean making a baby stick to a strict schedule. It means having a daily plan based on your baby's need to feed, sleep, have a bath, play, and have some quiet awake time. Settling is also part of this routine.

By 6-8 weeks you'll usually see a routine start to happen by itself. This is because you're getting better at knowing what the baby needs, and the baby now has fewer feeds. By about three or four months this routine will be more settled. Remember

that different babies have different routines and that routines change as the baby grows.

How much sleep do babies need?

Some babies sleep more than others. Time spent sleeping at night increases as they get older. They usually wake up two or three times a night until about six months.

- **Newborn.** 6-8 sleeps, each lasting about two to three hours.
- **6 weeks to 3 months.** 4-5 sleeps, each lasting about 2½ to 3 hours.
- **3 to 4½ months.** Usually 2 longer sleeps (4-5 hours), one of them usually at night, and 3 shorter sleeps (2 to 2½ hours)
- **4½ to 6 months.** About 8-10 hours at night (with a feed in that time) two to three daytime sleeps (2-2½ hours each)

Coping with crying

Crying is the only way a baby can tell you they are upset or need you for something. Babies under six months don't cry to annoy you or 'get their own way'. They're too young to think like this.

Babies cry because they

- are hungry or thirsty
- are too hot or too cold
- need a clean nappy
- have a pain or feel unwell
- feel scared or lonely
- are overtired

It's normal for babies to cry for a total of two hours a day, but some cry more. Crying is usually worse in afternoons and evenings. Most babies become more settled at about four to five months. But some babies still cry a lot at this age and older. Remember that it won't last forever.

Try using the settling advice given in the previous pages to help calm your crying baby. Give each method time to see if it works, rather than switching quickly from one thing to another. Try not to let the baby's crying become too distressed before you comfort him. .

What if nothing seems to work?

It's normal to feel helpless or stressed when your baby keeps crying. Just remember that babies are like anyone else – it can take time to calm down when you're upset. It's important to stay with your selected settling technique.

- If you begin to feel too frustrated put the baby in a safe place and go to another room for a short break. Don't feel guilty if you leave the baby to cry for a little while.
- When you go back, you may find the baby is easier to calm.
- Encourage your partner and other family support to be involved in settling the baby

What if the baby has colic?

When young babies cry for long periods in the evening, and draw up their legs as if they're in pain, some people say they have colic. Exactly what causes babies to become distressed like this isn't certain. Rubbing the baby's tummy with any massage oil warmed up in the palms of your hands may help calm him.

The problem usually goes away between three and six months of age. Talk to your Child and Family Health nurse or doctor and have them check your baby.

For more help and information contact:

- **Your Early Childhood Health Centre**
- **Tresillian Telephone HelpLine** (24 hours)
- **Karitane Care Line** (24 hours)

Please see your telephone directory for phone numbers.

This fact sheet is based on information provided by health professionals at NSW Health, Karitane and Tresillian.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>