

# Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre  
for Child Mental Health

## Communicating with your baby during 'tough times'



### Babies can pick up on changes when parents are upset

This resource will help you to connect with your baby during 'tough times' (e.g. relationship conflicts or separation, illness, financial difficulties, job stress, etc.), so that they feel secure and nurtured. It steps you through:

- **understanding how your experience of adversity affects you**
- **what your baby might notice and experience during these 'tough times'**
- **communicating with your baby to support a nurturing connection.**

**"I guess I never really thought about the fact that he could pick up what was going on with me. I thought he was just too little to understand that anything was wrong."**

Sophie, parent (NSW)

### Your relationship with your baby

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your baby views what is happening. It may be useful to talk with your health professional or another support person about the impact of adversity on your role as a parent. You may even find it helpful to work through this resource with them.

Parental adversity can take many shapes and affect parents in different ways. Just because you are a parent it doesn't mean you are unaffected by life's challenges.

It is important to remember that your experience of adversity does not make you a bad parent. It is possible to have a great relationship with your baby even when things are tough.

For some parents, adversity can become overwhelming and stop them from having the kind of relationship with their baby that they would like.

Start with the reflective exercise on the next page.

# A reflective exercise

*Do not do this activity if you are feeling particularly upset or overwhelmed today. If at any point you feel distressed, please seek immediate help. Lifeline (13 11 14) offers free, confidential, 24/7 support. For emergency support, dial 000.*

Think about the effects of your experience of adversity on you and what others may notice. Mark them in the list below to get started. You may like to fill this out with the help of your health professional or another support person.

- Worrying a lot
- Feeling sad or teary
- Feeling overly-sensitive
- Low motivation
- Feeling irritable/short-tempered
- Struggling to concentrate
- Feeling restless
- Feeling very tired
- Sleeping a lot
- Not mixing with others
- Feeling anxious
- Talking and moving slowly
- Feeling numb
- Suspicious thoughts
- Angry outbursts
- Seeing or hearing things
- Traumatic flashbacks
- Overusing alcohol or drugs
- Suicidal thoughts
- Self-harm

Are there any others? List these below:


Write five of the effects of adversity that worry you in the space provided below. Focus on those that have an impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your baby might see, hear and feel when they are with you. Write your thoughts in the space below.

**1.**

Effect:

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What does my child see, hear and feel?

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**2.**

Effect:

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What does my child see, hear and feel?

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**3.**

Effect:

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What does my child see, hear and feel?

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**4.**

Effect:

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What does my child see, hear and feel?

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**5.**

Effect:

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What does my child see, hear and feel?

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# Understanding what your baby notices and experiences

Although babies might not understand everything you say, they are very sensitive and responsive to your emotions and your tone of voice. You might notice that when things feel overwhelming, your baby's responses also change.

Take time to listen and watch your baby's way of communicating with you. If you are having difficulty reading or understanding their signals, seek advice from a health or early childhood worker or child family health nurse. You might find information from the Raising Children Network helpful ([www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au) - look for 'Babies: Connecting and communicating'). There is also a Parentline in each Australian State. Locate yours in your telephone directory or visit [www.parentline.com.au](http://www.parentline.com.au).

**Babies:** Babies cry and sometimes it can be hard to understand their distress. Your baby will be looking for you to respond.

**Parents:** Parents can find a distressed or crying baby increases their own stress. When this happens, take a moment to try and manage your own feelings before soothing your upset baby. Use a quiet, reassuring voice as you move closer to be with your baby.

**Your relationship with your baby:** Parents may sometimes feel they cannot understand their child's needs. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your baby's needs, set a time when you can find someone you trust to be with your baby while you take a break. You can then use this time to relax or to call the Parent Helpline, talk to a child maternal health nurse or your doctor.



## Communicating with your baby to support a nurturing connection

You don't need to explain your experience of adversity or hard times to your baby. When you are with your baby, it is important to find ways to connect with them to help them feel nurtured and secure.

Some tips include:

- Smile when you look at your baby.
- Maintain eye contact with your baby until they look away.
- Hold your baby close and cuddle them.
- Give your baby a massage.
- Gently rock your baby and talk in a soothing voice when they are upset.
- Use a warm, calm, 'sing-song' voice when you speak to your baby.
- Smile and nod when your baby makes sounds.
- Encourage your baby's little noises by repeating their sounds when they finish their 'sentence' to create your own two-way 'conversation'.

### Delivery partners:



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