

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Understanding infant mental health and wellbeing (for parents)

Resource summary

The period of infancy (from birth to two years of age) is one of rapid change, growth and development for both you and your baby. This resource aims to help you understand the changing nature of infant mental health and wellbeing. It provides information to help you identify potential infant mental health difficulties, and access support for yourself and your baby when things aren't going as expected. It has been developed with the guidance of family members with lived experience, practitioners and researchers.

Definition

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.



What is infant mental health and wellbeing?

'Infant mental health and wellbeing' is the term used by health professionals to describe a child's social, emotional and behavioral development. A key component of mental health is social and emotional wellbeing, which includes an individual's behavioural and emotional strengths.

The terms 'mental health and wellbeing' and 'social and emotional wellbeing' are often used interchangeably. This can be confusing, but keep in mind that both terms refer to your baby's ability to form close relationships, express a range of emotions and explore their surroundings in an age-appropriate way.

It can be hard to imagine what mental health and wellbeing looks like in infants. A baby with good mental health can:

- express a range of emotions
- confidently navigate their environment
- form secure connections; and
- achieve developmental milestones.

Infant mental health and wellbeing is not fixed. It can shift back and forth from 'positive' mental health or 'going OK', through to 'experiencing difficulties' or 'needing support' from parents, family members or a health professional.

Your baby may move up and down along this continuum multiple times a day, depending on what is going on in their world. And like adults, every infant has a unique temperament and personality, which can change the way they respond to different experiences. Thinking about the 'whole child' – their inner world, combined with their relationships and living environment – is key to understanding and supporting infant mental health and wellbeing.

The good news is most infants experience positive mental health, most of the time. This comes from feeling safe and secure in their environment and begins to develop the moment they are born.¹ Allowing your baby to express a range of emotions in response to their experiences, confidently explore their environment, and [form secure connections](#) with those close to them are all ways to support their positive mental health.

At the other end of the continuum, infants experiencing mental health difficulties might have trouble calming down; find it challenging to be separated from their parents; or have problems with sleeping, eating and excessive crying.

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When our son was three months old, he became really hard to settle. He would be fine and happy when awake but really struggle when we put him down to sleep, even when he was so obviously tired. Looking back, it started the same time my husband was in a bad motorbike accident. I know now that our son was picking up on the stress in the house, but at the time I didn't put together that he too was struggling with what was happening in our home.

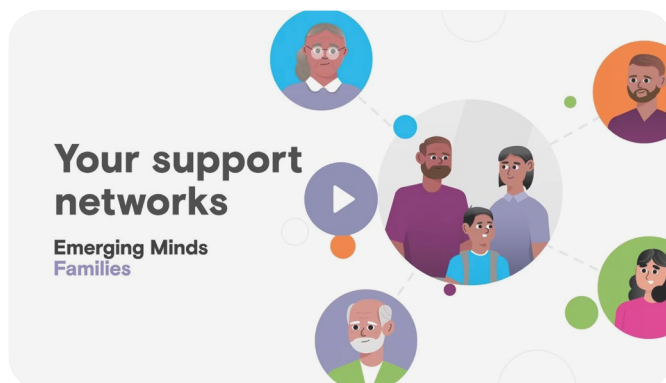
ALICIA, MOTHER, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

From before a baby is even born, their parents, family and close friends play a vital role in promoting their mental health and wellbeing. Supported by secure, consistent and nurturing relationships and a safe, stable environment, the infant begins to develop the building blocks of mental health and wellbeing. This foundation allows them to navigate all of the emotional experiences that life has to offer.

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I never understood the idea and importance of “your village” until I had my children. It really does take a village in the hard times, and it can take many forms. I had to learn to ask for help from family and friends and outsource anything I could ... I had to realise I couldn't do it all and give myself permission to ask for help.

MELISSA, MOTHER



WATCH THE VIDEO TO LEARN MORE

Understanding your baby's developmental milestones

Infants learn and grow so quickly. It can be difficult to know which behaviours are part of normal developmental changes; which are due to expected developmental delays, such as prematurity; and which are signs of possible mental health difficulties. To help you better understand your child's developmental journey, below are some common milestones an infant should reach in the first 12 months of life:

- **0–8 weeks:** From the moment they are born, your baby begins to build relationships through facial expressions, gazing and crying. By four weeks of age, they can follow an object and focus on a face. At around 6–8 weeks, your baby will begin to interact with their caregivers using vocalisations (making sounds) and eye contact, smiling and crying.
- **Two months:** Your baby begins to smile at people and can briefly self-soothe, often through sucking on their hand. They begin to 'coo' and make gurgling sounds. They can hold their head up and begin to push themselves up when lying on their stomach.

- **Four months:** At this age, your baby begins to recognise familiar faces and smile spontaneously. They enjoy engaging and interacting with people and will frequently try to get your attention (for example, by making noises or grabbing your face). They cry in different ways to show they're hungry, in pain or feeling tired, and will often cry when the attention stops. Babies of this age love affection, often copying facial expressions like smiling or frowning. Your infant might be able to laugh and roll over from their stomach to their back. They can reach for and hold an object, often bringing it to their mouth.
- **Six months:** At six months, your baby starts to respond to their name and make babbling noises. They will cry less, as they have learned other ways to communicate with you. Your infant will increasingly be interested in new toys and will try to reach for objects by rolling to them. They may roll over, and with your help, they may also begin to sit and stand.
- **Nine months:** Your infant may start to act clingy with their main carers and be afraid of new faces. They're beginning to understand the word 'no' and point to things with their finger. Infants at this age love playing 'peek-a-boo' and will start to pick up small objects (like sultanas) with their thumb and index finger. By nine months, they may be able to stand by holding on to something, sit without support, pull themselves to a standing position, and crawl.
- **Twelve months:** By now, your baby has learned so many new skills. They may be shy with strangers and cry when their main carer leaves. Children of this age enjoy communicating and may talk in their own language or say a few clear words. They understand more than they can say and can express more emotions. Your infant might repeat sounds or gestures to get your attention, hand you a book hoping you'll read to them, and make simple gestures like waving goodbye or shaking their head for 'no'. They may love to bang objects together and endlessly move items in and out of a container. While some infants may start walking at this age, most will only walk holding on to furniture.^{2,3,4}

For further information on developmental milestones, check out:

- [The Raising Children Network: Milestones for newborns \(0–3 months\)](#)
- [The Raising Children Network: Milestones for babies \(3–12 months\)](#)
- [Pregnancy Birth & Baby](#)
- [Health Direct](#)

Remember that while development generally happens in the same order, it is common for skills to develop at different ages. If your baby doesn't follow this timeline exactly, it is usually not something to worry about. However, one thing to keep in mind is that infant mental health difficulties can overlap with physical health concerns. When in doubt, speak to your general practitioner (GP) or [child and family health nurse](#). To learn more about the role of a GP, watch [What is a GP?](#) on the Emerging Minds Families website.



How to recognise your baby's level of mental health and wellbeing

With these milestones in mind, how do you recognise when your infant is doing well, showing signs of mental health difficulties, or needs further support?

When babies are experiencing positive mental health, they're achieving their developmental milestones (taking into consideration any disability they may have). They will be engaging with you (e.g. keeping eye contact, smiling and laughing), feeding and sleeping well (mostly), and will be interested in life around them.⁵ This is a beautiful time, when children start to form secure relationships with the people who care for them.

It can be harder to know when your infant is experiencing difficulties, as the signs are generally less obvious than they are in older children. A couple of common things to watch out for are:

- **Sleeping:** It's helpful to monitor how your baby's sleep is going. Some infants who are experiencing mental health difficulties may have trouble falling asleep, or may only sleep for short periods of time. Read more about infant sleep issues and solutions in our fact sheet, [Supporting your baby's sleep](#).
- **Feeding and eating:** This can be a really trying time for both you and your baby. Infants are breast-, chest- or bottle-fed, before learning the smell, feel and texture of food as solids are introduced at around six months. Infants who consistently refuse to eat or who overeat may be experiencing mental health difficulties.¹ You can find more information on ways to handle feeding difficulties in our fact sheet, [Feeding your baby: Advice for parents](#).

When thinking about infant mental health and wellbeing, it's important to consider any changes in your baby's daily routine or environment. For example, have you moved house? Is your family experiencing an extreme period of stress or relationship difficulties? Have there been any other big changes in your life recently? When these kinds of events occur, a temporary change in your infant's behaviour is to be expected. But with care and time, most infants will return to their normal routines. Always remember that if you're in doubt or the concerning behaviours persist, you should speak to your GP or child health nurse.

Early emotional or mental health problems don't just go away on their own, so it's important to know the signs that your baby might need some extra help. Getting support early reduces a child's risk of developing mental health difficulties later in life.

From before they're even born, an infant's parents, family and close friends play an important role in supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

Seeking support from family and friends

It can be tricky to identify what is 'normal' infant development and what is a sign of mental health difficulties. This can in turn make it hard to know when to seek support from your family, friends or a qualified practitioner. But understanding that household stressors, such as financial pressures or relationship breakdown, can affect your infant's wellbeing is an important first step.

For many parents, seeking help from supportive family and friends may be enough to help both them and their baby through tough times. You could ask family and friends:

- to care for your infant for a few hours or overnight if they can bottle-feed, to give you a break and some (probably much needed) sleep
- for help walking with, holding and soothing your baby if they're particularly unsettled
- for help picking up groceries, doing housework or preparing meals, to take some pressure off you in the evenings; or
- to go for a walk with you and your infant to get some fresh air, exercise, adult company and to debrief. They may even have suggestions as to what's helped them to care for children during difficult times.

You can also find lots of helpful information online:

- Our fact sheet on [self-care for parents](#) offers tips to help you look after your own wellbeing.
- The Raising Children Network has a wide variety of resources around caring for [newborns \(0-3 months\)](#) and [babies \(3-12 months\)](#).
- Beyond Blue has great information about [emotional health and wellbeing for new parents](#).

When seeking support from friends and family or accessing information online, it's important to monitor your infant's behaviour. If you have ongoing concerns, contact your GP. They will be able to work with you to develop strategies to help your baby, or connect you with further professional supports.

For many parents, seeking initial help from supportive family and friends can often be enough to help both them and their infant through tough times.



Parent-child relationships

A child's closest relationships –with their parents, extended family and carers – are the most significant factors in their life. From birth, the quality and stability of those key relationships influences how a child's brain grows and functions. This can impact their mental health and wellbeing, self-confidence, learning, behaviour and how they relate to others, throughout their lifetime.

Family life can have its ups and downs as you navigate factors such as relationships, work-life balance, financial concerns and your own mental health and wellbeing. Taking time to build a strong relationship with your child can help reduce the impact of significant life events and build their resilience into the future.

We know this may be difficult to read, but it's important to recognise that as a parent, abusive or neglectful behaviour towards an infant often leads to potentially life-long difficulties.⁵ However, a strong infant-caregiver relationship can help buffer the effects of negative life experiences.⁵

This means that even if you're struggling yourself, there are simple steps you can take to support your baby's mental health and wellbeing. It's also important to recognise the strength it takes to care for your child's wellbeing, despite whatever else is going on around you, and acknowledge this strength within yourself.



So how can you build a strong bond with the infant in your care, and help create positive mental health and wellbeing moving forward? The following are some practical strategies you can try right now:

- 1 Spend time holding your baby and looking into their eyes** (when they're awake). This can be surprisingly difficult for some parents. You can start by setting a timer for two minutes and doing this every day for a week, then building up to 10 minutes or more a day over time. Do this at a time of day that you and your baby are as relaxed as possible. Try to stay curious about their cues. For example, if they look away, it is often their way of telling you that they need a rest from interacting with you.
- 2 Smile at your infant and make loving noises and sounds.** Tell them you love them (if you feel able). As you navigate various parenting challenges, it might be difficult for you to access feelings of love and connection with your baby. During these times, you might want to sing them a song or read them a book. Even though infants don't understand all words, it's good for them to hear their parent or caregiver's voice.

- 3 Respond to your baby when they cry** by going to them and trying to settle them. It's OK to not always know how to help; simply by trying, you're showing your infant you're there for them when they're upset. It can be hard to be with your baby when they cry, especially if you don't know how to calm them down. It's normal to feel overwhelmed at times; if you need a break, ask a partner, trusted friend or family member to take over for a few moments while you step away.
- 4 Look after yourself.** It's important to support your own mental health and wellbeing, so you have the capacity to adapt to your infant's physical and emotional needs. Smiling Mind is a free resource designed to support your wellbeing, as well as that of your whole family, through mindfulness techniques. They even have a 'Sleep for Families' app to help everyone sleep better!
- 5 Play 'peek a boo' with your baby.** In her TED Talk, seven-year-old Molly Wright – one of the youngest-ever TED speakers – [highlighted the benefits of play for lifelong learning, behaviour and wellbeing.](#)

The Raising Children Network offers more information on [bonding with your infant.](#)

A strong infant-caregiver relationship can help buffer the effects of negative life experiences. Even if you're struggling, there are steps you can take to support your infant's mental health and wellbeing.

Infancy is the perfect time to help your child build the foundations of good mental health and wellbeing. Remember that even if you're experiencing difficulties in your own life, by taking the time to hold, smile at and interact with your baby, you're building a valuable bond with them. This is an important factor which will help them to develop positive mental health and resilience to support them throughout their lifetime.

Can't find what you're looking for?

We recognise that there are many organisations also doing great work in the mental health space for families. We've put together a list of free resources from trusted Australian organisations who we work with and can recommend.

References

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