

Emotional & Social Development in Babies: Birth to 3 Months

By 2 months old, your baby will spend much of each day watching and listening to the people around them. They learn that they will entertain and soothe them, feed them and make them comfortable. During their first month, they'll experiment with primitive grins and grimaces. Then, during the second month, these movements will turn to genuine signals of pleasure and friendliness.



Your baby's first true smile

If you've experienced your baby's first true smile, then you know it's a major turning point for both of you. All the sleepless nights and erratic days of these first weeks suddenly seem worthwhile, and you'll do everything in your power to keep those smiles coming.

For their part, your baby will suddenly discover that just by moving their lips they can have "conversations" with you. Smiling will also give them another way besides crying to express their needs and exert control over what happens to them.

The more engaged they are with you and your smiles and the rest of the world around them, the more her brain development advances, and the more they'll be distracted from internal sensations (hunger, gas, fatigue) that once strongly influenced their behavior. Their increasing socialization is further proof they enjoy and appreciate these new experiences. Expanding their world with these experiences is fun for both of you and important to their overall development.

Holding your gaze

At first your baby may seem to smile past you without meeting your gaze, but don't let this disturb you. Looking away from you gives them some control and protects them from being overwhelmed. It's their way of taking in the total picture without being "caught" by your eyes. In this way, they can pay equal attention to your facial expressions, your voice, your body warmth and the way you're holding them.

As you get to know each other, your baby will gradually hold your gaze for longer and longer periods; you'll find ways to increase their tolerance—perhaps by holding them at certain distances, adjusting your voice level or modifying your expressions.

Emotional/social milestones for your 1- to 3-month-old

- Begins to develop a social smile
- Enjoys playing with other people and may cry when playing stops



Becomes more communicative and expressive with face and body

Imitates some movements and facial expressions

Smile "talk"

By three months, your baby will be a master of smile "talk." Sometimes they'll start a "conversation" with a broad smile and gurgling to catch your attention. Other times they'll lie in wait, watching your face until you give the first smile before beaming back their enthusiastic response. Their whole body will participate. Their hands will open wide, one or both arms will lift, and their limbs will move in time with your speech. Their facial movements also may mirror yours, especially if you stick out your tongue!

Like adults, your infant will prefer certain people. And their favorites, naturally, will be her parents. Grandparents or familiar sitters may receive a hesitant smile at first, followed by coos and body talk. By contrast, strangers may receive no more than a curious stare or fleeting smile. This selective behavior shows she's starting to sort out who's who in their life.

"Conversations" with siblings

At about 3 or 4 months old, they'll become intrigued by other children. If they have siblings ([/English/ages-stages/prenatal/Pages/Preparing-Your-Family-for-a-New-Baby.aspx](#)), you'll see your baby beaming as their brothers or sisters talk to them. This fascination with children will increase as your baby gets older.

These early exchanges play an important part in your baby's social and emotional development. By responding quickly and enthusiastically to their smiles and engaging them in these "conversations," you'll let them know that they are important to you, that they can trust you, and that they have a certain amount of control in their life. By recognizing their cues when they're "talking," you'll also show you are interested in and value them. This contributes to their developing self-esteem.

How your baby communicates needs

As your baby grows, communication will vary with their needs and desires. On a day-to-day basis you'll find they have three general levels of need, each of which shows a different side of her personality:

- **When their needs are urgent—hunger or pain, for instance—they'll let you know.** They may do this by screaming, whimpering or using desperate body language. In time you'll learn to recognize these signals so quickly you usually can satisfy your baby almost before they know what they want.
- **When your baby is peacefully asleep, or alert and entertaining themselves, feel reassured you've met all their needs for the moment.** This is a welcome opportunity to rest or take care of other business. Playing on their own provides you with wonderful opportunities to observe—from a distance—how your baby is developing important new skills such as reaching, tracking objects or using their hands. These activities set the stage for self-soothing ([/English/ages-stages/baby/crying-colic/Pages/Self-Soothing-Helping-Your-Baby-Learn-This-Life-Skill.aspx](#)), which will help them settle down and ultimately sleep ([/English/ages-stages/baby/sleep/Pages/getting-your-baby-to-sleep.aspx](#)) through the night. These are especially important skills to learn for more colicky ([/English/ages-stages/baby/crying-colic/Pages/default.aspx](#)) or difficult-to-console babies.
- **Each day there will be periods when your baby's obvious needs are met but she's still fussy or fitful.** They may whine, have agitated movements or exhibit spurts of aimless activity between moments of calm. They probably won't even know what they want, and any of several responses might help calm them. Playing ([/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/3-ways-your-child-builds-important-life-skills-through-play.aspx](#)), talking, singing, rocking and walking may work. Simply repositioning them or letting them fuss ([/English/ages-stages/baby/crying-colic/Pages/Calming-A-Fussy-Baby.aspx](#)) it out may also be a successful strategy. You might also find that while a particular response works momentarily, they'll soon become even fussier and demand more attention. This cycle may continue until you either let them cry a few minutes or distract them with something different—for example, taking them outside.

As trying as these spells can be, you'll both learn about each other because of them. You'll discover how your baby likes to be rocked, what funny faces or voices they most enjoy, and what they most likes to look at. They'll find out what get a response from you, how hard you'll try to please them, and where your limits lie.



When your baby won't stop crying

There may be times, however, when you feel frustrated (</English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/is-it-normal-to-feel-completely-overwhelmed-after-having-a-baby.aspx>), even angry, when your baby will not stop crying. The best thing to do here is gently place your baby back in the crib and take a little break for yourself.

It is most important you resist any temptation to shake or strike your baby in any way. The danger from shaking your baby is great and can cause them serious damage. "Shaken baby (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Abusive-Head-Trauma-Shaken-Baby-Syndrome.aspx>)" situations are one form of child abuse that continues to be a problem around the world.

If crying difficulties remain an issue, discuss this in detail with your pediatrician. They can give you other ideas for how to get through these episodes. Be sure you share these new techniques for quieting your infant with your childcare provider, who may feel similar frustrations with inconsolable crying.

More information

- [Ask the Pediatrician: When do babies first smile? \(/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/When-do-babies-first-smile.aspx\)](/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/When-do-babies-first-smile.aspx)

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