

Supporting your newborn baby's development: information for families

If your baby has a stay in hospital when they are born or soon after birth there are lots of things they may experience that their body might not be ready to manage. By making adjustments to your baby's surroundings and how you carry out their day to day care, you can also reduce the stress they can feel in hospital.

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) gives suggestions as to how you can continue to encourage your baby's development, even while they are in hospital. These suggestions come from our Occupational Therapy team who between them have many years' experience of working with children, young people and families.

When babies are born, they have lots to learn about the world and their place in it. Having a stay in hospital can disrupt this but there's lots you can do to continue to help them develop skills.

Consider their surroundings

Hospitals are busy places – full of strange sounds and bright lights – but there are adaptations you can make to give your baby more peaceful surroundings. Please check with your bedside nurse.

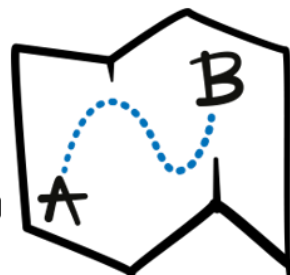
- Wherever possible, do not let your baby lie under bright, artificial lighting. If there is a window nearby, use this to provide natural lighting.
- There will be times when the doctors and nurses need brighter light to examine or monitor your child but this doesn't have to be on all the time.
- When you're in hospital it can be difficult to tell the difference between night and day. During

the night, try to dim the lights so that your baby is aware they should be sleeping.

- You may also have to keep the blinds open a bit so the nurses can see in without disturbing you but you can close them over so the corridor lighting isn't so bright.

Think about noise levels around your baby, particularly if they are having support from machines such as monitors or infusion pumps that have alarms. You won't be able to turn off the alarms as they're there for your baby's safety but you may be able to 'mask' general background noise from the ward.

- Using 'white noise' – continual low level noise – can help a baby to cope with more obtrusive noises. 'White noise' apps and sound channels are readily available online or as baby toys.
- Alternatively, you could play the radio at a low volume, either with music or talking, especially if you listen to it usually from home.



Helping your baby feel secure

You can also adapt how your baby is nursed in a cot to keep them comfortable and secure. If your baby is being supported by machines such as infusion pumps, talk to your bedside nurse about how you can work around these to improve your baby's position.

- Using sheets and towels to make a 'nest' for your baby can help them feel secure. In the same way as they kicked and pushed in the womb, they can do the same sort of thing inside the nest. Check with your bedside nurse to make sure that your baby's nest is safe for them and their stage of development.
- Sometimes your baby might have tubes or wounds that are irritating. Holding them in your arms can keep them safe and distracted but it can be more difficult when in the cot. Put soft baby toys which fit into your baby's hands to distract them and encourage them to use their hands such as an octopus' legs, a doll's arms.
- If distraction with baby toys doesn't work, talk to your bedside nurse about using baby mittens, baby grows or clothing with built in mittens to keep wriggly fingers and hands away from tubes or wounds. Make sure the mittens aren't too tight so your baby can still use their hands and let them have some time each day when their hands are uncovered. Exploring with their hands is important for soothing and development.

Positioning your baby

Try not to keep your baby in the same position in the cot all the time. They can lie on their back, front or side safely in hospital – remember, at home they should always sleep on their back to reduce the risk of cot death.

- Aim for a symmetrical position – with both sides of the body in the same position. You can use a soft roll or rolled up towel to support them if needed. If your baby rests their hands

on their chest or near their face, this is usually a sign that they are comfortable.

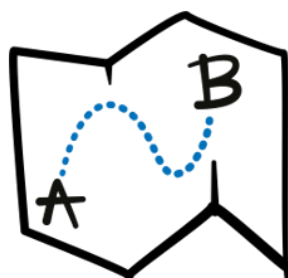
- Swaddling can be helpful if a baby is irritable or they need an uncomfortable procedure. Swaddling is simply holding a baby snugly wrapped in a blanket or towel so that their arms and legs are contained. This is similar to how they developed in the womb and can be very restful.

Ask your occupational therapist about positioning your baby and equipment or aids that might help.

Everyday tasks

Babies need a lot of care especially in hospital, but giving care in the right way can help their development as they grow older. Even when your baby is in hospital, you can help to care for them – at GOSH we encourage and support families to be involved in day to day care as much as they feel able.

- Try to keep to your baby's usual routines if possible – especially sleep and feeding times. This gives some structure to your day and helps balance activity with rest. If the doctors and nurses need to carry out a procedure while your baby is sleeping or feeding, ask them if it could be delayed a little until your baby has finished. This may not always be possible, but do ask.
- When you are moving your baby, dressing them or changing their nappy, try rolling them into position rather than lifting them. Many babies find this preferable as it is comforting.
- Skin-to-skin contact between you and your baby is also very comforting – they can hear your heartbeat and feel the warmth coming from your skin. Try to build some skin-to-skin time in each day – ask our staff to support your privacy to do this – use curtains or a sign on the door so you're not disturbed unnecessarily.
- Soothers, dummies or pacifiers can help encourage sucking and also calm a baby. There are lots of different types available for



different needs so ask for advice. The key thing to remember is to keep it clean, sterilising it regularly and replacing it when worn. Using your fingers, or supporting your baby to put their own fingers in their mouth, is also a good way to encourage soothing sucking.

Keeping a diary or log

These are exciting times for you and your baby, even while they are in hospital. Try to make short notes of what happened each day, how your baby was feeling as well as their achievements.

- It can be helpful to note when your baby was awake and sleep – this can help to develop a

consistent routine so you decide when it is best for your baby to receive care and treatment. Some care might need to be given at a set time, but always discuss with your bedside nurse to see what can be changed.

- Recording each day what things your baby enjoyed and which things they find unsettling or upsetting can help you get to understand how you can best support your baby. This information can then be used to minimise distress and discomfort.
- Not only will you learn to get to know your baby, you can pass on helpful information to others looking after your child.

Further information and support

If you have any questions about your baby's development, talk to a member of the Play team or ask your bedside nurse to contact the Occupational Therapy department.

