

## How to Survive Your Child's First Year

By Bernadette Davidson

September 4, 2015



*Image courtesy of Flickr user Katie Wilson.*

The first year with your new baby is a time of change and getting to know each other. Babies grow at an enormous rate this first year, tripling their weight in one year and often going from reflex behavior and total dependence to walking and uttering their first words. So just when you have one parenting skill down, the baby enters a new stage with new challenges for you.

Most babies wake several times during the night to feed in the early months. Many sleep during the day and *rock and roll* all night. This is normal and takes time to change, but it usually does in the last half of the year. In the first three or four months everything is new for your baby and their nervous and digestive systems are still developing. Some of their fussing is caused by hunger, gas or a mushy diaper. Sometimes it's just that once a baby starts crying, it's hard to stop. Some babies have the infamous colic (nobody knows why) and for some children it's just their temperament.

All babies are born with a temperament. Temperaments describe how the baby reacts to the world around them. For example, how do they react to changes? How intensely do they respond to stimulation in the environment? Sometimes they are categorized as flexible, feisty, fearful or hard to define. Some babies are peaceful and regular; others unpredictable and hard to quiet. The good news is that with time, most parents learn how to moderate the environment for their baby and most babies do just fine. If you have a baby who is hard to quiet, it is not that you are doing something wrong. Your job is to see what helps your baby learn over time to self-quiet and accept in the early months what nature gave you. A lot of this is about genes as well as environment.

So what things sometimes work? It's different for different babies, but these are a few things to try. Some babies love motion, so walking, taking a walk in the carriage or going for a drive in the car can work. The downside of this method is that while the baby may fall asleep while in motion, when you stop the movement, the baby often wakes up and fusses.

Some babies respond to music. A music box by the bassinet or music from the computer or your voice singing lullabies will soothe the baby who will stop and listen and fall to sleep. Many parents find that a sound machine with continuous soothing noises often works well.

Other babies respond to touch. Swaddling the baby but leaving room for movement in the legs can help the baby self-soothe. A baby massage or warm bath also can help. These babies often like parents to hold them close to the body with one of the many baby carriers. The important thing to remember is, different babies like different things. Your job in the first year is to learn to read your baby.

As your baby enters the end of the first year, try to establish a routine before bed. A nice routine is a story ("Goodnight Moon" is a favorite and comes in several languages), or a series of lullaby songs sung in the same order. A new mom I know closes the blinds and waves goodbye to the street. She washes her son's face and then reads a story and sings the same three songs holding her child and rocking him. Then when he is still slightly awake but drowsy, she turns on the sound machine and lays him down. These routines work over time and you will find one that works for you. Remember, there is no magic bullet and routines take time to establish.

Another topic of importance is breast feeding. Most medical experts recommend breast feeding, and some even say every three hours or so initially. Most hospitals have folks to help you get started. Breast feeding provides great immunities for the newborn's body, and gets you and your baby off to a good start. However, if your lifestyle, health or body make breast feeding hard to do fulltime, once you establish the breast feeding, you can express your milk and freeze or leave it for later. You can also supplement if your doctor and you decide it is in the baby's interest. Even a little nursing during the day is worth it, so give it a try. Yet, don't guilt trip if it does not work out for you. Your baby will grow and be healthy anyway.

The last important thing for parents to know is that it is in the first three years of the baby's life that the brain lays the foundation upon which all other development grows. So don't worry about spoiling your

baby in the first year. Respond to your baby. When your daughter or son is well-fed, rested and alert, play with your child. Take a walk around the room and name things. Talk with your baby about what you are doing and what your child is looking at or touching. Sing and dance and look at picture books and name the things in them. There are wonderful, funny picture books for infants and toddlers. Pick ones you like because you will read them often.

While babies should be put to sleep on their backs, every baby needs some tummy time. Place a comfortable blanket or mat on the floor with a toy, mirror or yourself within sight. Your baby will soon raise his or her head up to see, an action that will lift the torso and then help your baby flip over. Your baby will eventually sit and crawl from this position and then pull up and walk. All of this happens in the first year.

The most important thing to tell new parents is that caring for an infant is tiring and hard. You will have some blissful moments and times when you feel overwhelmed. It's OK not to feel great every day about this important job. The Children's Trust Fund has a wonderful site called "[One Tough Job](#)." It has great resources and can connect you with other parents.

Take care of yourself and your partner! A large percentage of women experience depression during this time. With hardly any sleep combined with all the changes going on in your body and your lifestyle, this is no surprise. Get help if you need it and let your loved ones know you need help from them and a break sometimes. Remember, you will make mistakes sometimes and learn as you go. Parenting is a lifelong job and the best and most challenging one in your life.