

The First Year of Life

The processes of conception and birth are no less than miraculous, and the actual presence of a new little soul, especially if it is the first child, can bring to a family a startlingly profound sense of grace and gratitude. Meeting the unflinching gaze of the newborn in the first weeks may even evoke in the parents a new kind of selfless love. A young mother expressed this experience by saying, “Now I know what devotion is.” At the same time, the enormous responsibility of parenting a newborn can also evoke doubt and uncertainty. New parents will hopefully be able to surround themselves and their child with a warm community of support during the first weeks and months after the arrival of their baby.

During the first year of life both baby and parents have many new experiences and will make ongoing accommodations for the unfolding needs and capacities of the growing child. The child will gradually come into rhythm with eating and sleeping. We can support the health of the whole family by recognizing the gift of sleep and establishing regular sleep rhythms and rituals.



The child will form secure bonds with mother and father and later on, begin to open up to other relationships. The bodily senses will begin to develop, with the sense of touch and life (well-being) being particularly important in the first few months and self-movement (proprioception) and balance becoming increasingly important as the child becomes more mobile. These four bodily senses will continue to be important throughout the first seven-year cycle.

Parents will also observe the exquisite sequence of developmental movements that begin with the child's focusing of the eyes and discovery of hands and progress to rolling over, sitting up, crawling and, finally, to the crowning achievement of standing upright. Ideally during this process the involuntary primitive reflexes will fade into the background as the child's movement repertoire expands.

Challenges can arise in any of these areas— in establishing rhythms, in bonding and separation, in sensory or movement development. The following suggestions as to how to approach these challenges come out of the understanding of the nature of the young child in the first seven years.

Slow Down. The pace of modern life is too fast for the young child. The young child needs time, quiet, and occasionally being left alone to be able to access his or her innate

developmental wisdom. It can be equally helpful for parents to slow down and enjoy the overlooked treasures of daily life.

Be Present. Bringing respect, reverence, and full attention to the bodily care of your child can strengthen your relationship and help welcome the child's being into the physical body.

Observe and Listen. Watching and listening to your child will help you develop sensitivity to his or her needs and at the same time, help you let go of unnecessary agendas or worries. You will learn to distinguish the meaning of different kinds of cries and other displays of discomfort, as well as what brings on smiles and laughter.

Warmth. When we speak about warmth in relation to the young child, we mean both physical warmth and soul warmth. The child's sense for physical warmth is not yet developed and we need to make sure that the child's physical forces are being used for growth rather than for staying warm. The soul warmth of the family also protects the child and invites him or her into life.

Create a Safe Space for Free Movement Exploration. The child learns and develops capacities through movement. The restraint of a car seat is necessary for the child's safety, but freedom to move in an uninhibited way as often as possible at other times is the best way to support the child's unfolding movement capacities. The size and nature of the play space will change as the child grows from a blanket on the floor to a child-safe room next to the kitchen where a child can explore freely while dinner is being prepared. We need to resist the temptation to help the child or use equipment that helps the child sit or stand prematurely. Play objects can be simple and will also change as the child grows. Observing what interests your child in the moment will help you choose new play objects as he or she grows.

Take Walks in Nature. Give yourself and your child regular excursions in the fresh air and elements. Of course this implies dressing the child in proper clothing for the weather and protecting the child from overexposure to heat or cold. Babies love to lie on the grass beneath a tree and watch the dancing light and shadows of the leaves overhead. The rhythm of walking or walking with the child in a stroller can soothe the fussiest of babies. The younger child is, the more important it is that he or she is nestled in the parent's arms (rather than facing outward in the baby carrier) or can see the parent's face when being pushed in the stroller.

Sing. Sing to your child. A baby is very attuned to the sound of the parents' voices. You will of course speak to your child, but sing to your child, too, even if you only know a few songs. There is nothing as calming to most babies as a lullaby. This is a timeless tradition that is as true now as it ever was.

Trust. Learn to trust in your developing relationship with your child and your own intuition. When questions arise, new parents should, of course, use supportive resources such as doctors, counselors, and more experienced parents, but also weigh the advice given to you with your own growing understanding of your child. Trust also in your child's capacities. Life is not always easy and we need to allow our children to learn to overcome small challenges.



Renewed trust, in yourself and in your child, is the gift of the first year. You have survived life with not enough sleep, overcome fears of failing to be the perfect parent, and discovered a newfound joy to balance what you may have had to let go of in choosing to become a parent. Your child's openness and trust in the world may even have led you to a greater trust in life.

Links

[J. Swain, "Emmi Pikler's Trust in the Wise Infant,"](#) from *A Warm and Gentle Welcome* (WECAN 2008)

Books

[T. Atchison & M. Ris, eds., *A Warm and Gentle Welcome* \(WECAN 2008\)](#)

M. Gerber

Dear Parent: Caring for Infants with Respect (Resources for Infant Educators 2003)

Your Self-Confident Baby (Wiley 2012)

[H. Heckmann, *Nokken: A Garden for Children, 2nd Edition* \(WECAN 2015\)](#)

M.T. Schunemann

Sing a Song with Baby (Naturally You Can Sing 2001) *The Wonder of Lullabies* (Naturally You Can Sing)