



Mercy Family Birthing Center
1603 – C 12th Avenue Road
Nampa, Idaho 83686
(208) 463-5940

STARTING OUT RIGHT

Caring for a newborn is a challenging and sometimes complicated task. The baby's crying may seem a tyranny, beginning at any moment of the day or night, and requiring immediate attention. The process of learning to understand a baby's needs sends some parents into a panic; they fear they will never again have any time to themselves. They foresee a future in which parenting overwhelms all other aspects of their lives. Their sometimes-desperate state of mind may prevent them from truly hearing their baby's signals, from patiently trying to meet the infant's present need. They may offer sophisticated nursery equipment and modern gadgets instead of what is really needed: their own closeness.

Consider some attitudes and actions that can help you make a positive beginning with your newborn.

FEEDING:

In the womb your baby was fed by continuous transfusion directly into the bloodstream. Filling the stomach and digesting food are new experiences. Baby's stomach is small and empties rapidly. The common assumption that "the longer the interval between feedings, the better we are doing" is a myth that can lead to misery for both parties. In fact, if you are thinking in terms of regular feeding intervals, you are likely to be at odds with your infant. During wakeful periods, a baby may want to nurse almost all the time.

Widely-spaced feedings may keep a baby perpetually uncomfortable, alternating between feeling stuffed and starved. The typical newborn will feel more calm and comfortable if allowed to eat little and often. Babies have a physiologic need for this type of "grazing." Don't be worried, though, if your 1-2 day old prefers sleeping to eating; this is a normal part of recovering from the birth process.

SLEEPING:

There is a wide variety of "normal" in sleep needs and patterns. Your baby will get just as much sleep as needed, whether this agrees with your expectations or not. Newborns are unlikely to sleep in solid stretches of 3-4 hours, except perhaps once or twice every 24 hours. And this longer stretch of sleep is just as likely to occur during the day as at night. Try to sleep when your

baby sleeps. You cannot make your baby sleep on your schedule, but you can waste a tremendous amount of time and energy trying!

SCHEDULES:

Parents tend to try to hurry babies into becoming organized and routinized, even though this is a physiologic impossibility. It usually takes 4-6 weeks or more of maturing for a newborn to grow into a “settled” baby. The parents’ “we-must-do-something” attitude is likely to prolong the settling process. A newborn needs total indulgence of all needs. This does not qualify as spoiling (by parents) or manipulation (by baby). It is simply allowing the baby to be a brand new baby. Your baby will be calmer and more confident later if all early needs are met completely and pleasurably.

So relax! Treat clocks as irrelevant to your baby’s life. Abandon the dated idea that active management of your newborn will produce easier management later; the contrary is true. New babies should have what they want when they want it.

CRYING:

A baby who is allowed to “graze,” sleep, and wake in its own unpredictable pattern, whose needs are met promptly and cheerfully, will have lesser need to communicate by frequent crying. This is particularly true of babies whose parents keep them close to their own bodies, i.e. in their arms or in a sling or baby pack tied to their own bodies. Babies are soothed by the parent’s heartbeat and movement. The early physical closeness gives baby a sense of security that makes separateness more manageable later on. Pediatricians agree that crying means tension and may itself contribute to colic, with a vicious cycle of tension, distress and discomfort.

Doing all you can to interrupt that cycle will help a newborn to adapt to life outside the womb and discover self-calming behaviors. When there are fussy times, try to meet your baby’s needs for that moment without allowing your mind to make any predictions about the future. Babies will adjust more easily to their parents’ lifestyle if they are first helped to adapt to life outside the womb. Put other activities on hold for a month or two. If you allow your baby to be just a baby and yourself to be primarily a parent, the stress of the early weeks can be minimized.

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