

Becoming a parent

In this session we're going to help you navigate the early stages of parenthood. We're going to cover bonding and attachment, early development, tummy time, car seat safety, healthy diet, healthy relationships and oral health. Becoming a parent for the first time can be daunting. There's so much to remember. But all parents feel like this. Experiencing a mixture of hopes and worries about what's ahead.

Bonding and attachment

Bonding and attachment with your baby begins even before they're born. Your baby has been able to hear your voice since around week 18 of your pregnancy. By 24 weeks those little ears are rapidly developing, so your baby's sensitivity to sound will improve even more as the weeks pass. Talking to and touching your bump is a great way to support your baby's early development, helping build connections in the brain while they're in the womb. It doesn't just have to be you, all members of the family can talk and sing to your bump helping your baby start to recognise familiar voices.

When your baby's born, touch, eye contact and speech and communication are vital to brain development in the early days and weeks. Interestingly, babies first recognise sound, taste, and smell before sight. Baby's sense of security comes from starting to recognise the people who care for them most, which is why it's best in the first few weeks that just two or three people handle the baby most of the time. Respond to their physical needs. For example, go to them when they're crying, feed them, rock them to sleep, change them when they're needed.

Early development

In the first six months, your baby's brain develops faster than any other time in their life and there are critical windows for optimum brain development. From birth to four months, vision and hearing develops, and from birth to nine months, language develops. Did you know that your babies can copy you poking out your tongue within 20 minutes after birth? This is their first deliberate interaction.

Tummy time is great for your baby's upper body muscle development. This position helps your baby, with pushing up and weight bearing. Babies actually have heavy heads in relation to the rest of their body. It's hard work for them, so lots of encouragement is important. Tummy time is also a good opportunity for dads and siblings to get down on the floor alongside baby and chat to them or play with them. Did you know that tummy time at this stage will eventually help with potty training? Your baby will start to feel the effects of gravity and experience a full bladder. Babies who spend time on their tummy will also gain head control quicker, be able to sit unsupported sooner, be more likely to crawl sooner and roll and change positions more easily. As important as tummy time is, baby should always be put down to sleep on their backs. Remember, back to sleep, tummy to play.

Car safety

It is really important that babies are transported in the correct car seat for their age. This is to ensure their safety. Spending more than 30 minutes at a time in car seats can affect baby's physical development. Did you know that legally babies must travel in a rear facing car seat until they are 18 months old? It is recommended ideally until four years old. Don't worry, they cross their legs. The middle of the rear seat is considered the safest place to put a car seat as long as you have a three point harness, not just a lap belt. This is because it is the furthest point from impact within the car. Otherwise the back seats are safer than the front seats. Having a baby in the front seat is a distraction if you are a driver. Your attention is diverted from the road to the baby. But if you do have to use the front seat, make sure your airbag is switched off to avoid injuring your baby.

When you go to buy a car seat, it's best to take your car. The salesperson will be able to advise which seat fits your car best. Any parts that need to remain in the car, such as the car bases that seats click into, need checking monthly in case they need to be tightened. We would recommend not opting for a

second hand car seat unless you know where it has come from and can be sure that it has never been involved in an accident. Become familiar with strapping your car seat in and getting out of the car before your baby arrives.

Carrying your baby

Babies love to be held and carried as this is where they feel safe and confident. Slings are a great way to keep your baby close while also leaving your hands free for other things. Slings can be worn by either parent, which is great for bonding and attachment. There are several types of slings for newborn babies from structured slings, soft woven wraps and structured wraps. Carriers can vary greatly in price. Why not find a local sling library and try before you buy?

When carrying your baby, remember the acronym TICKS to make sure baby is positioned correctly. T is for tight, I is for in view at all times, C is for close enough to kiss, K is for keep chin off chest, and S is for supported back.

Pet safety

Pet safety advice from the PDSA recommends never leaving your baby alone with a pet. You should either make the pet leave the room when you do or take the baby with you where you're going.

Oral health

Pregnancy can certainly take its toll on your body, including your teeth. Babies require a large amount of calcium whilst they're growing in the womb. Occasionally, this can lead to dental problems for mums. Make sure you have a check-up towards the end of your pregnancy or if you experience toothache at any time throughout your pregnancy. Did you know that your dental healthcare is free from 20 weeks pregnant until your baby's first birthday with an NHS dentist?

Healthy diet

Despite what some people think, during pregnancy you only need an extra 200 to 300 calories a day. And that's in the last 3 months of pregnancy. The food you eat can be rich in protein, calcium, and vitamin D. If you're going to breastfeed a calorie intake of approximately 1,800 to 2,200 calories should enable you to maintain a good milk supply. You may be advised to take a vitamin D supplement. For pregnant women vitamin D can help to regulate the levels of calcium and phosphate in your body. You need calcium and phosphate to keep your bones and teeth healthy. Not having enough vitamin D when you're pregnant or breastfeeding may prevent your baby from getting enough calcium and phosphate too.

It's important to keep active, and if you're normally an active person then there's no need to cut back on what you do. Walking and gentle exercise can help to keep you supple and strong during pregnancy, and as your body changes to accommodate baby. If you're taking classes or going to the gym, ask your instructor about antenatal and postnatal adjustments you might need to make to avoid injury.

You may be entitled to Healthy Start vouchers which give you vouchers to spend on fresh fruit, veg, and milk. You can ask your midwife or health visitor about these.

Healthy relationships

Both you and baby need to feel secure and supported. Your relationship has a big role to play in how you're able to cope with the new challenges of parenthood. In the early days, you're going to feel tired and your hormones are going to be all over the place. It is understandable that you may be irritable or upset.

It's true that babies can pick up on tension. Even in the womb they can pick up on the stress levels you experience. When going through such a huge life change it's so important that you and your partner remember to help each other. Be kind and encourage one another. Lack of sleep can make people very sensitive. It's worth thinking about ways to help each other around this before the baby arrives. Perhaps plan to take it in turns to look after baby and sleep in the early days.

Did you know that when you get angry or upset your body releases cortisol, a stress hormone. This can affect emotional development. Hugging releases oxytocin, known as the happy hormone. It is recommended five hugs a day, with humans or pets, to enhance general wellbeing.

Babies in the womb are affected by the things you do to your body. It's important to be aware of harmful habits that can be dangerous for them. Smoking isn't recommended whilst pregnant. Your midwife or health visitor can refer you for support to help you stop. We also don't know enough about the effects of alcohol on an unborn baby. So we advise that the safest approach is not to drink at all while you're expecting.

Child and family wellbeing centres are found across Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland. They will each have a list of support services which you can access.