

# Young parents

Being a mum or dad is one of the most important roles anyone can have. There are lots of new things to learn which can be fun as well as challenging. Having a network of people and services that can help is important so you don't feel you're doing it all on your own.

Enjoying being with your baby and finding out all the unique things about them can really help you adjust to your new life.

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## About you

Some young people decide to become parents because they feel ready for this big step. Others might get a surprise when they find out they're pregnant. They might still be learning to become independent and make their own decisions. Some might be in a relationship and will be parenting with a partner, others may be parenting alone. Some may have finished school and left home while others may still be living with their family.

Most new parents say you can do lots to get ready for the birth of your baby,

but nothing quite prepares you for how different life is after they are born. Your baby relies on you for everything and their needs now come first. Many say the joy of being a parent is like nothing else they have ever felt, although there are worries too. Many parents find that good information helps and that they also learn about parenting as they go along.

Becoming a parent at a young age can be very challenging. It is also a chance to grow and learn as a person.



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## Looking after yourself

### Get support

The saying 'It takes a village to raise a child' means it's a big job which is best done with the support of others. Having family, friends and other supports to help out when needed can make a big difference. If you are on your own, try to develop a network of supportive people and services around you.

### Make friends who share similar interests

You may drift away from old friends because you don't share the same interests any more. You could join a young parents' group to make new friends. Your children can play with other children and have fun while you share ideas and ways of coping.

### Find ways to deal with stress

It is important to find ways to stop stress building up:

- being outdoors can help you feel more relaxed so you might want to take your child to the local playground or have a picnic in a park
- eating well, being active and getting enough sleep all help to reduce stress.

It's OK to need your own space at times. Ask someone you trust to care for your child so you can have a night out, go shopping or do something special for yourself. Make special time to spend with your partner if you have one.

### Know that difficult feelings are normal

All parents and children have times when they feel tired, unwell, frustrated or angry — it's a normal part of life. When you feel stressed or upset, stop, take a deep breath and think about what your child really needs from you before you act.



## Being organised and flexible

Parenting is easier when you are organised and plan ahead, but it is also important to stay relaxed and flexible if plans have to change.

- Plan ahead for visits to your doctor, child health nurse or play groups, especially if you don't have your own transport.
- Plan your budget so you can meet baby's needs and pay your bills.
- If you are taking baby out, get things ready well ahead of time. There can be many things to prepare, e.g. things they might need for nappy changing, feeding and sleeps.
- If things happen to affect your plans remember your baby needs you to stay calm.

You will also find that your baby grows and changes quickly. It helps to be flexible so you can adapt what you do to meet their changing needs.

Go outside, ring a friend or someone who understands and talk about it.

If you feel down a lot of the time, talk with your doctor or child health nurse.

### Plan for your future

As a young parent it is important to have skills that can help you get work when you need to. Young parents who keep on learning, either through school or training programs, have a better chance of finding work they really enjoy.

Some schools have programs designed for young parents and usually have a crèche on site. TAFE and other training providers also have lots of courses. Some have counsellors who can help with information about things like Centrelink benefits, subsidised child-care and how to get financial and other practical support.

It is important to look after yourself as a parent so you can look after your family.



## Being a good role model

Children learn by watching and copying others, especially their parents. They will learn how to manage their feelings, deal with frustration, care for themselves and get on with others from how you do these things.

It is important to act how you would like your children to act.

It is also important to be careful who you choose to have around your child.

If a child sees lots of drinking, drug use or violence it can have a negative impact on them. They can also think this is what grown-ups do and may copy this when they get older.

If you don't know someone well or you don't feel comfortable around them, it's a good idea to not leave them alone with your child.

## About your child

It helps to know about your child's basic needs and how these change as they grow.

### Responding to baby's cries

The world is a very new and strange place for babies. They need to learn it is safe and that there are people who will look after them. When they feel safe, they are able to grow and develop their best.

Crying is the only way they can let you know they need something. When you respond quickly and warmly, using soothing words as you work out what they need, babies learn to trust you will take care of them.

### Touch

Warm, loving touch is very important for babies. When you hold them gently and lovingly, you are helping them grow. Watch to see what sort of touch your baby likes, and notice when they have had enough.

### Love and affection

Giving your child heaps of cuddles and telling them you love them helps them feel loved and secure. It also helps their brain development.

### Time and attention

Babies and children want you to spend time with them and take notice of them. This might mean giving up things you want to do, or pretending you are interested in what they're doing even when you don't feel like it.

### Reading

Reading with your baby right from the start is one of the best things you can do for their development. When you hold them and share a book it brings together all the things they need

most — closeness, safety, touch, seeing, hearing, and learning about sounds and what they mean.

Even if you don't like reading yourself you can enjoy this special time of closeness, knowing you're giving your baby an opportunity — one that you may not have had yourself.

### Play and learning

Babies and young children need lots of things to do to help their brains develop and to learn. Play is how children learn and have fun at the same time. The good news is that parents are their best playmates and they love it when you:

- talk and read lots to them
- sing to them
- take them for walks
- lie on the floor and let them crawl over you
- play with them and their toys
- dance with them.

The other good news is that the best toys for young children are ones you don't have to buy. They love things like saucepans and lids, pegs to put into containers, or cardboard boxes of different sizes to make tunnels and cubby houses.

Change toys often to give variety. You could join your local toy library and borrow toys at no cost.

Babies' brains also need a rest. When you see they've had enough, e.g. they might yawn or look away when you try to play with them, just spend some quiet time together.

### Being with other children

Children need to interact with others, including other children. This builds confidence to learn and socialise when they go to kindy and school. Take your child to a playground or join a playgroup so they can mix with other children.



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### Managing anger

Parenting is not easy at times. Even if you get very stressed or upset, never do anything that could hurt or frighten your child. If you worry you might 'lose it' and hurt your child or yourself, get help straight away. Always make sure your child is safe first.

Never shake a baby. It can cause serious brain damage that can last a lifetime. Some children die.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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**Looking  
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## Safety

Children are curious but don't yet understand danger. They need you to keep them safe.

- Many children are injured by falls. Don't leave them alone on change tables, furniture or play equipment.
- Keep poisons such as detergents, garden products, medicines, cigarettes, alcohol and drugs up high where children can't reach them, or in cupboards with child-proof locks.
- Never leave a child alone in a driveway and always secure them in the back seat if you need to move your car.
- Always watch children around water, especially pools. Empty baths or buckets when not in use.
- Don't have hot drinks near you when holding baby and don't leave pots on the stove unattended.
- Don't leave candles burning, and put guards around fireplaces.
- Smoking around babies and children harms their health and can also risk a burn.
- Using alcohol or drugs around your child can put their safety at risk.

Most injuries to babies and children can be prevented. It is important to know the risks and to make your house and outdoor area safe. The most important thing is to supervise them at all times.

ParentLink — for other parenting guides, online parenting information  
**[www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)**

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support  
**[www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres)**

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens  
**<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>**

## Getting help

When you become a parent you may think you need to do everything yourself without others interfering. However, we all need to say 'I don't know' or 'I need help' sometimes, without feeling embarrassed.

Many young parents have found that:

- other young parents are a good source of information about where to get support
- sometimes they feel judged when going to an agency, a doctor or a clinic for help. It's important to look around until you find someone you feel comfortable with
- you can ask health workers for referrals to services who will be able to help you. Some have specific services for young parents
- it can help to take a friend if you are worried about going on your own
- when family members and friends give advice they are just trying to help. Be willing to listen - the more ideas you get, the more you have to choose from. It doesn't mean you have to do what they suggest. Choose what feels right for you.

It's OK to make mistakes — it is part of how we all learn. It is also important to get help when you need it.

