

Surviving the First Six Months of Your Baby's Life

MAUREEN JEFFRIES

As new parents know, raising a child would be a lot easier if babies came with an instruction manual. The truth is there is no instruction manual, but as Dr. Steven Stravinski, director of the Department of Pediatrics at Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck, says, "You should relax, enjoy parenting, and have a good time, because there is very little that you can do wrong."

As your little one progresses during the first few months of life, his main goal is to sleep, eat, and grow. Newborns may sleep as much as 20 hours a day, just not in a row. Moms should try and sleep when their newborn sleeps, resting as much as possible and learning to enjoy those first few months of motherhood with baby.

"The first developmental milestone you'll notice is that babies eyes move from cross-eyed to coordinated," explains Dr. Stravinski. You'll also notice that at about two months, a baby will recognize their mother above everyone else, and they may begin to "talk" a little bit. Don't be fooled by those first few smiles. "They just might be gas," jokes Dr. Stravinski, who assures new moms that babies will really begin to respond and smile (really) at around two or three months of age; by three months, your

baby will sit and look at you and make real cooing sounds.

Starting Food

By four months old your child should lose their extrusion reflex—the reflex that causes their tongue to push out when they have something in their mouth. Depending on your pediatrician's counsel, this may be the time to start introducing solid foods, starting with simple cereals like rice and oatmeal, and progressing to simple fruits and yellow vegetables. Dr. Stravinski advises introducing a new food every three or four days to check your child's reaction and make sure she doesn't have any adverse reactions or allergies to a food.

The five things that Dr. Stravinski says you should avoid feeding your child during his first year are honey, cow's milk, wheat cereals, egg whites, and peanuts, because there is some data that suggests that the earlier your child is exposed to these foods, the greater the chance of his suffering an allergy to them.

Dr. Stravinski also suggests that you don't impose routines on feeding your baby. If you offer her enough, she will be nourished, and a baby knows when to stop. It's only when they are older and begin to eat junk food that parents

Dr. Naomi Greenblatt's Top 10 Tips

1. Take care of yourself. Allow 20-30 minutes each day to recharge. Take a bubble bath, read, or treat yourself to a manicure, and sleep every chance you get. Think of your cell phone—if you don't recharge the battery, it doesn't make calls!

2. Slow down and pace yourself. What new mothers need to realize is obvious but not intuitive: babies work on their own clocks. Remind yourself of that—embrace the change of pace, instead of having it frustrate you.

3. Set realistic expectations for yourself, your spouse, and your new family.

You need to discuss expectations and roles with your husband before the baby is born so that everything will run more smoothly. Set realistic goals for yourself as well. If you're expecting to come home from the hospital, fit in your size two jeans and continue to have lunch with your friends; that just may not happen. And that's OK.

4. Learn to accept help. Now is not the time to feel like you need to handle everything on your own. When people offer to help, say yes, and when you need help, learn to ask for it.

5. Keep a personal journal. For five minutes a day, write down the things you felt good about or are thankful for, and then refer to the journal when you are feeling overwhelmed to remind yourself of the joy in your new life.

6. Keep things in perspective. When it comes to making decisions about your baby,

ask yourself: what is the impact of this decision? Chances are there really isn't a wrong decision you can make. If you waste \$10 on a pack of diapers that you don't like, it probably won't break you. No one is perfect and that's okay—we all learn by trial and experience.

7. Do what feels right for you and your baby. Despite what well-intentioned friends and the baby books say, you know yourself and your baby better than anyone else. You will get a lot of advice; use only what fits.

8. Appreciate this time. Enjoy everything that this time and experience brings you. For the first six months of your baby's life, he is totally dependent on you and unable to do anything on his own. This is really a special and limited time in his life. Take the time to look into his eyes and notice his small features and how beautiful he is when he's sleeping peacefully. Sometimes that gets lost in the overwhelming sensation of sleep deprivation and trying to keep a household together.

9. Join a new mom's group. Speaking with other new moms can be an opportunity to realize that you are not alone in many of your feelings and experiences.

10. When you have questions, ASK! Even though you know your baby better than everyone else, you still may have questions and concerns. Call your pediatrician, ask a friend for guidance, advice, or help, but don't hesitate to ask.

need to watch for the signs of childhood weight gain and obesity.

Bedtime routines may be started during the first six months as well, because children thrive on routine. Start getting your little one into the routine of dinner, bath, reading a book like *Good Night Moon*, and then getting to sleep, but don't expect an infant to follow your schedule to the letter. This early routine is just setting you up for later in their life. "Trying to impose a lot of things on a newborn isn't ideal," says Dr. Stravinski. "It's easiest just to follow their lead during the first six months when you are building the foundation of trust, comfort, and happiness." Remember, too, that you are not going to spoil a newborn by responding to her needs, you're going to teach her that she is surrounded by people who can take care of her.

Mothers' Moods

As your child progresses each day it's easy for new parents to feel overwhelmed. As postpartum hormones change, mothers may find themselves feeling blue, which is very normal, according to Dr. Naomi Greenblatt, reproductive psychiatrist and founder of the Rocking Chair (www.therockingchair.org), a woman's wellness center in Englewood. She explains that up to 80% of women can experience symptoms of the baby blues during the first days and weeks after delivery. Symptoms can include rapidly fluctuating mood, irritability, anxiety, and the feeling of being overwhelmed.

These symptoms typically peak at about four or five days after the birth of your child and should subside by two weeks after delivery. "As wives and mothers, we often set the emotional tone not only for ourselves but for our families as well," says Dr. Greenblatt. If you are experiencing these symptoms three to four weeks after the birth, you should seek help, because 10-15% of women experience postpartum depression. "That's one in 11 women," cites Dr. Greenblatt.

A woman suffering from postpartum depression may experience symptoms that are more severe than ordinary baby blues, and they may start in the first one to three months of motherhood—even as far as six weeks past the baby's birth. Symptoms of postpartum depression may include more significant depressive symptoms which can affect a mother's ability to care for her baby—depressed mood, feeling tearful, loss of interest in usual activities, not wanting to go out even to take a walk with the baby, being ambivalent about her baby. In the most severe form new mothers may experience thoughts about death that are intrusive or unwanted and they may even have thoughts of harming the baby.

Of the women who experience postpartum depression, 30% will also experience symptoms of anxiety. Symptoms normally resolve themselves on their own in 12-18 months, but the first year of life is so special that Dr. Greenblatt urges mothers to seek help so they don't miss out on those first few months. And be-

cause most medications take four to six weeks to take effect, waiting only takes more time away from enjoying your new baby. Don't worry if you are breastfeeding—there are medications that you can take while you are nursing, she says.

If you are feeling any of these symptoms, talk to your pediatrician, your obstetrician, or a reproductive psychiatrist like Dr. Greenblatt. There is help for you, and no reason that you should feel alone in the process or that you should let feelings of anxiety or being overwhelmed keep you from thriving during your baby's first six months.