

Senses and Your Newborn

Your newborn may seem to do little more during the first weeks of life than eat, sleep, cry, and, oh yes, provide dirty diapers for you to clean up. But in reality, all of his senses are functioning already, taking in the sights, sounds and smells of this new world he's entered. It's hard for us to know exactly what a newborn is feeling - but if you pay close attention to his responses to light, noise and touch, you can see his complex senses beginning to come alive.

SIGHT

A newborn's sight is perfectly set to see the most important things in the world to him - his parents' faces. New babies can see best at a distance of only 8 inches to 14 inches, bringing his eyes in focus when he's gazing up from the arms of Mom or Dad. Your newborn can see things further away, but it is harder for him to focus on distant objects. Still, the light shining in from a faraway window may catch his eye, and he may stare at another family member moving around the room.

After human faces, brightness and movement are the things he likes to look at best. Even a crude line drawing of two eyes, a nose and a mouth may keep his attention if held close enough. Although his sight is functioning, it still needs some fine tuning, especially when it comes to focusing far off. His eyes may even seem to cross or diverge (go "wall-eyed") briefly. This is usually just a sign that your newborn's eye muscles need to strengthen and mature a bit during the next few months.

Your newborn is better equipped to see contrasting colors than closely related hues. Black-and-white pictures or toys will keep his interest far longer than objects or pictures with lots of similar colors. Knowing that your newborn sees and enjoys seeing should prompt you to give him lots of interesting sights to look

at, but don't overload him. One item at a time is plenty. And don't forget to move your baby around a bit during the day. You'll be providing a needed change of scenery to your little looker.

HEARING

Your newborn has been hearing sounds since way back in the womb! Mother's heartbeat, the gurgles of her digestive system, and even the external sounds of her voice and the voices of other family members have been part of his world for a while now. Once he's born, the sounds of the outside world come in loud and clear. Your baby may startle at the unexpected bark of a dog close by or a plate breaking on the floor. He may seem to be soothed by the gentle whirring of the clothes drier or the hum of the vacuum cleaner.

Try to pay attention to how he responds to your voice. Human voices, especially Mom's and Dad's, are his favorite "music." He already knows this is where care comes from: food, warmth, touch. If he's crying in his bassinet, see how quickly your approaching voice quiets him. See how closely he listens when you are talking to him in loving tones. He may not yet coordinate looking and listening, but even if he stares into the distance, he'll be paying close attention to your voice as you speak.

TASTE AND SMELL

We assume newborns can smell because we know they can taste, and these are the two most closely related of the human senses. Research with new babies shows they prefer sweet tastes from birth and will choose to suck on bottles of heavily sweetened water but will turn away or cry if given something bitter or sour to taste.

Think of the world of smells an ordinary day affords your newborn: your clothes, dinner cooking on the stove, flowers in the yard. And at this point at least, you

don't have to worry too much about your baby's taste buds. Breast milk (the best!) or formula will satisfy him completely!

TOUCH

As it is to most humans, touch is extremely important to your newborn. Through touch, he learns a lot about the world around him. At first, he is looking only for comfort. Having come from a warm and enveloping fluid before birth, he'll be faced with feeling cold for the first time, brushing up against the hardness of the crib, feeling the scratch of a rough seam inside his clothes. He'll be looking to his parents to provide the soft touch he needs: silky blankets, comforting hugs, and loving caresses upon his head. With almost every touch your newborn is learning about life, so provide him with lots of tender kisses and he'll find the world a soothing place to be.

SHOULD I BE CONCERNED?

If you just want a little reassurance that your baby's senses are working well, you can do some unscientific testing for yourself. Hold a small light just out of his direct line of vision, about a foot away from his face. He should turn to look at the light. Don't be too worried if it doesn't hold his attention for too long - the fact that he responded by looking at the light indicates that he is seeing it. In just a few short weeks, your newborn baby will begin to follow a moving light with his eyes.

If your baby's eyes seem to cross or diverge (go "wall-eyed") more than just briefly, point this out to your doctor. Usually no intervention is necessary, but sometimes medical correction will be required. Also tell your doctor if your baby's eyes appear cloudy or filmy, or if they appear to wander in circles as they attempt to focus.

Most newborns will startle if surprised by a loud noise nearby. If you want to check that your baby is hearing, you can make a sharp noise while standing behind him. He should jump a little - but if he doesn't, don't worry. It may mean he was concentrating on something else and had "tuned out" the real world at that moment. Just try the noise test again later. There are other ways to rest assured your baby is hearing well. Does he stop crying once he hears your voice moving toward him? Does he respond to soft lullabies or other music? Do sounds made out of his line of vision capture his attention, even though he can't see where they are coming from?

If you have any further concerns about your newborn's ability to see or hear, you should bring them to your doctor's attention immediately. Even newborns can be tested using sophisticated equipment, if necessary. The sooner a potential problem is caught, the better it can be treated.