

MoxieTopic: New Parent Survival Guide

So you have this baby, and they let you go home with it, and you're wondering what, exactly, you're supposed to do next. And you know that billions of people have done this before, so you think you can probably do it, too, you just aren't sure exactly how it's all supposed to work.

This is big. And scary.

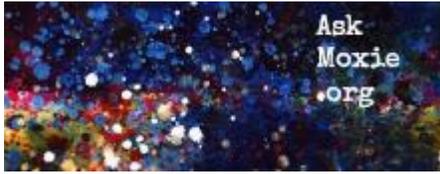
The good news is that 60% of parenting is showing up, 30% is giving hugs, and 10% is laundry. You can do this.

Before you start, let's establish the right mindset. There are three truisms about having a child:

1. Your baby has never done this before, so your baby doesn't know what you're "supposed" to be doing. You're learning this together.
2. No one comes out of childhood completely unscathed. Everyone has something they could talk about in therapy. You can't be the perfect parent, but you can make sure your child always knows you were trying.
3. Parenting is hard. You can do it.

Bear those things in mind as you read this New Parent Survival Guide, and as you parent your child for the rest of your life. This is going to be scary sometimes, and beautiful sometimes, and disgusting sometimes, and it'll make you cry sometimes. But you'll do it, because that's what parents do.

You are the best parent for your child.



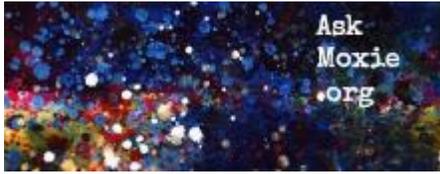
First things first: You

If you have a partner or another adult with you in your living space, make a pact to focus on working together to care for the baby. It's easy to drift into letting one person be in charge of the baby and get worn out and stressed, while the other person isn't sure what to do. But if you can divide jobs in a way that makes sense to you and means both of you are interacting with the baby and also having your own needs met, everyone benefits. If you don't have a parent or other adult sharing the parenting, plan ahead to ask family and friends to be with you. If you have other people who can help you with things like laundry, cleaning, and food, it makes things much easier, so consider asking for help (especially when people offer!) if you don't have helpers lined up yet.

Do your helpers have to know anything about babies? NO. In fact, it's often more helpful if they don't know anything about babies (as long as they know they don't know anything about babies). A helper who knows about babies may try to take over caring for the baby or assert opinions that prevent you from forming your own routine and trusting your own instincts about the baby. (And they might even ask you to care for or entertain them instead of learning your baby!) But someone who knows nothing about babies can still do laundry, acquire food, hand you a glass of water, keep you company, and look the weird stuff up in the baby book for you to see if it's normal, while you learn your baby. You're better off in the first few weeks with a teenage boy than a grandmother of 12 if the teenager will take care of you and the grandmother requires being taken care of.

Consider also that the first few weeks are disorienting, hormonally-charged times, so people you already have minor conflicts with will rub you the wrong way. Think about who you can trust (for real) and who you actually want around you in the first few weeks. Your child needs for you to be as strong and unstressed as possible, so protect your space and your feelings. If you absolutely have to have someone in your space who's going to rub you the wrong way, see if you can find a trusted friend to run interference and manage the person, or assign the person special jobs ahead of time.

There are a number of different ways to divide the labor. If someone is breastfeeding, one common way is for the person who's breastfeeding to do the feedings and have the other adult do everything else (diaper changing, burping, soothing, bathing, etc.) while friends and family help take care of you by doing laundry and feeding you. Or you could just divide jobs right in half. Whatever 1) lets each of you get to know your baby and spend time doing caregiving tasks for the baby, 2) maximizes the sleep you both get, and 3) keeps you connected to each other, as well as minimizing the busywork maintenance tasks, is the right division of labor for you.



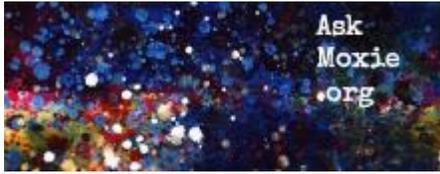
A note about physical recovery: If you gave birth to your baby, you are going to need to recover from that process. You may look and feel recovered on the outside in a week or two (if you have an uncomplicated vaginal birth), but your body really needs to heal and go back from the inside out, too. Don't rush it. Rest as much as you can for six weeks after you give birth. Drink as much water as you can. Let others take care of you. Sleep when the baby sleeps. If you do too much too soon it will catch up to you (and increases your risk of developing post-partum depression). Taking time to recover physically is a huge gift you can give your family.

Essential parts of recovery. Your partner or friends should help enforce these for at least the first six weeks:

1. Rest. Lie down or sit, and don't do non-baby work if at all possible.
2. Sleep. Whenever you can.
3. Water. 3 quarts/liters a day at the least.
4. Good food. Protein, vegetables, fruits, and good carbs.
5. Fresh air outside. Fresh air and sunshine will help your body recover.
6. Touch that isn't asking anything of you. There's some evidence that being given 15 minutes of massage every day works as well as antidepressants at preventing post-partum depression. Your partner will be happy to help you heal by giving you a little massage every day.
7. Good company and laughter. Being on call with a baby is hard, and it's easier when you have other adults around to make you laugh.

Post-partum depression is real, and it happens to both mothers and fathers. The leading factor in preventing post-partum depression is support, so please reach out to ask family and friends for help so they can step forward to help you.

Another leading contributor to PPD is sleep deprivation. There's no way to avoid some sleep deprivation with an infant, but if it's possible to arrange things so every adult gets at least one four-hour stretch every night and then another few shorter stretches of sleep, you have a better chance of not developing PPD. This may mean parenting differently than you thought you were going to, taking shifts, or "stealing" sleep at times



that aren't the nighttime. Your priority is your health, physical and mental. Do what you have to do to keep everyone healthy and sleeping as much as possible.

If you gave birth, the hormones are going to be rushing out of your body for the first three weeks, and weepiness and anger and giddiness are normal, as long as the bad feelings aren't consistent. (Days 3 and 10 postpartum tend to be big hormone days, with big mood swings.) Once your hormones start to stabilize, though, if you're feeling weepy or disconnected or flat or apathetic, tell someone. Tell your partner or a friend or someone else, and have them help you tell your doctor. PPD is a treatable condition. You don't have to feel like this. If you're breastfeeding you don't have to stop to get treatment for PPD if you don't want to, so please ask for help if you realize you're not feeling like yourself.

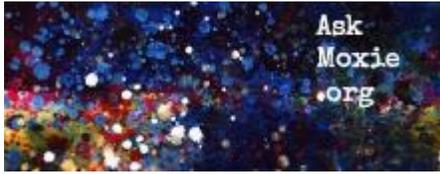
You're going to consider buying some books

You might want a baby book so you can look up random stuff that happens. My favorite is the Penelope Leach book. If you get the Sears book, the medical stuff is good but skip the first few moralizing sexist chapters. The AAP book is a little alarmist. If you don't want to buy a book, use your research and discernment skills on the internet. Most things are not life-threatening, so look for reliable sources, not someone on a message board who heard something from someone. Treat researching stuff for your baby like you would researching to write a paper you were going to submit to a peer-reviewed journal.

You don't need a book that tells you a parenting method. Your baby is a human being. Get to know each other. Those parenting method books are selling you an ideology, and that's ok, but you're smart enough to be able to form a relationship with your baby without someone else's ideology (which won't fit you anyway). Don't have anything to do with Babywise/Ezzo, and please, if you love your child at all, don't even touch anything by the Pearls.

Books that give you data points and maps or timelines of what's likely to happen (but don't tell you only one way to respond) are good. I really like The Wonder Weeks for the list of developmental leaps in the first two years, and the Ames and Ilg series for each year.

I know you're going to be tempted to buy a sleep book, or someone's going to give you a sleep book saying the book saved their life. Don't believe the hype. Every sleep book has a different method that the author is convinced is the only way to get a baby to sleep and



if you don't do it that way you'll ruin your kid forever. The problem with that is that your baby won't have read the book you have, so it's highly probable that your baby won't conform to the method of the book you have. If you really want to read that sleep book, read ALL the sleep books so you can at least get a broad view of all the theories. But you'll be better off if you just spend time observing your child and how they sleep and process energy, and THEN look for information about sleeping (after five months, when sleep starts to settle in) that works with the way your child naturally sleeps.

DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE LAUNDRY

There is so much more laundry that needs to be done once you have a baby than you could ever have imagined. Make sure you have plenty of laundry detergent on hand. If people ask if they can do anything, take them up on their offer by asking them to come throw in a load or two for you and then fold it when it's done. And just know that someday your child will be able to do their own laundry.

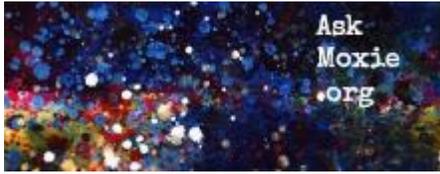
Now, on to the actual baby

Your job is to teach your baby trust--to trust you and to trust the world. That means that you need to respond to your baby and learn what your baby's personality is and what your baby, specifically, needs. It means learning about each other and forming a relationship. If you can think of all the caregiving jobs as part of forming a relationship, it gets way easier to see that you don't have to do any one job perfectly, you just have to do it adequately and with as much love as you can muster in that moment.

There is no such thing as doing everything perfectly or being a perfect parent.

(Actually, I've gotten several emails over the years from people saying their parents were so perfect when they were growing up that they're scared they can't parent their own kids well enough and are wracked with anxiety and shame. So being perfect doesn't even help your kids. Make some mistakes so your kids can have a happy life.)

You are the best parent for your child.



The relationship

You are going to fall in love with your baby, but it might not happen right away.

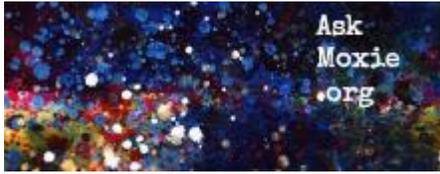
A lot of us develop a feeling that's a combination of love (not "in love," but love) and protectiveness within hours of the baby's arrival. And some of us even fall in love with our babies right away, too. But it's totally normal not to fall in love with your baby (even though you love/feel protective of them) for weeks and weeks. It doesn't mean that anything's wrong--it just means that you two are on your own timeline. (If it turns into months and you don't feel love or attachment, you might have PPD that's preventing you from attaching, so talk to your doctor, because once you get treated for PPD you'll be able to attach.)

Another thing that happens is that you develop a parenting spidey sense. Sometimes it's called "mother's instinct," but dads get it, too. It's a result of a combination of trusting your instincts in general, and observing your baby and learning what's normal for your specific baby and what's not. If you tend to trust your instincts in general, just sit back and pay attention and be with your child, and the spidey sense will click in.

If you don't tend to trust your own instincts in general, you'll need guided practice: Whenever there's a situation involving instinct, write down (on paper, in an Evernote file on your phone or computer, someplace else) what your instinct is telling you to do. Then, when the situation plays out, go back and assess whether your instinct was correct or not, and write that next to your initial instinct. After a few weeks of parenting you should be able to see in writing whether your instincts are accurate or not. If they are, practice deliberately following them. If they aren't, see if you can figure out why not. Were you missing some key information? Did you diagnose the wrong problem because you prioritized incorrectly? If you can figure out how you misread the situation, you can correct, and your instincts will become more accurate.

Why am I talking so much about developing your spidey sense and following your instincts? Because your job is to teach your child to trust and then show them how to be a functioning human in the world. That requires that you a) love your child (which will deepen over time), and b) know when to act and when to hold back (whether that's taking your baby to the doctor for a fever or picking your teen up from a party that's getting dangerous) based on your instincts.

So. There's no one perfect way to do anything with a baby, just a deepening of the relationship between you that makes you both better at loving each other the way you need to be loved.



Now to the nitty-gritty of the actual tasks.

The first few days

You'll bring the baby home, and the following things will happen:

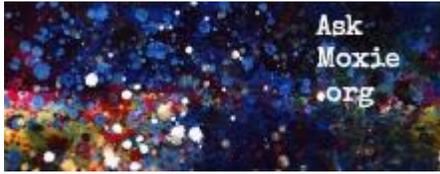
- You'll feed the baby
- You'll burp the baby
- The baby will sleep
- The baby will cry
- You'll spend a lot of time trying to figure out why the baby is crying
- You'll change the baby's diaper
- You'll wonder if there's something you're doing wrong
- You'll wonder if it's going to be like this forever
- Repeat

The thing it's hard to understand before you have a baby is how constant and unrelenting and how simultaneously boring the caregiving is. Infants really basically do nothing except eat, sleep, cry, and poop for the first 4-6 weeks (at which point they start smiling and responding to you), so it can feel like a vast pit into which you're throwing all your best efforts, 24 hours a day every day.

Do not look back at the end of the day and ask yourself what you "did," especially if you are the kind of person who usually rockets through a to-do list. Parenting an infant is exhausting and can be demoralizing precisely because all the tasks are so small but so constant. At the end of the day, your big accomplishment is that you're all still there. That's life with a newborn.

This is not, in fact, what the rest of your life is going to be like. I'm not going to tell you to "enjoy this time so much because it goes so quickly" like the lady at the grocery store will. Because while the first few weeks are a special time, they're not really a fun time. But, because you know they're not going to last forever, you can try to cut yourself a break and just let yourself kind of zone out and succumb to the newborn rhythm and constant waves of caregiving tasks.

There's a reason they call the first 12 weeks "the fourth trimester." It's because newborns are still growing and developing before they're ready for the world. They don't know how to sleep yet, and some of them aren't even good at eating when they come out, and some of them don't even seem to be comfortable in air instead of amniotic fluids. So this is all a time of just learning how to be, and what the world is like.



What is your job in the first few days? Rest as much as possible. Drink a lot of water. Let other people take care of you. Focus on feeding the baby. Sleep when you can. Don't think about it too much.

The things your baby will do for the first three weeks:

- Adjust to being “on the outside”
- Sleep in weird little chunks, many of them not at night, and be awake for weird little chunks, many of them at night
- Learn to eat
- Learn to be held by you
- Learn that someone will come when they cry

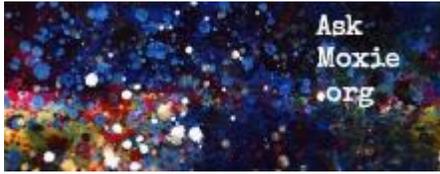
At around three weeks (adjusted for gestational age) the baby will have a growth spurt, involving a couple of days of eating more and more often than usual. If you're breastfeeding, drink more water and just nurse when the baby wants to--this is bringing up your supply. If you're formula feeding, feed the baby whenever the baby indicates hunger, even if it seems like “too much.” It'll last for a couple of days.

After the growth spurt is over, the baby will eat more at each feeding, but the feedings may space out. The baby's sleep might also start to consolidate a little.

What is your job in the first three weeks? Keep resting. Sleep whenever you can. Focus on feeding the baby. Let someone else change and bathe the baby. Keep drinking water. Go outside every day. Let other people take care of you. Eat when you're hungry. Make it through the growth spurt. Try to appreciate the little things and not think about where you are in your life right now.

Between three weeks and six weeks the baby will:

- Start to be a little responsive (turning their head toward you when you speak)
- Start to smile
- Continue learning how to eat and be held
- Increase confidence and trust that someone will come when they cry
- Maybe start tending toward more sleep in the dark, but maybe not yet



There's another growth spurt at six weeks, like the one at three weeks. (Some babies hit one harder than the other.) Go with it, and you'll see the same consolidation of feedings and of sleep once it's over.

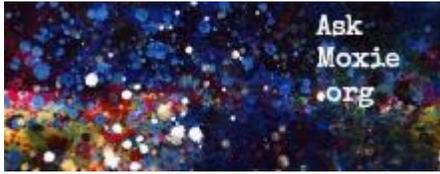
What is your job in the second three weeks? Keep resting. Sleep whenever you can. Focus on feeding the baby (it should be getting slightly easier). Respond a lot when the baby tries to engage your attention. Keep drinking water. Make sure the baby sees sun first thing in the morning (setting the stage for sorting out days and nights) and take the baby outside every day if the weather's decent. Start getting your own self-care routine down if your helpers have gone. Make it through the growth spurt.

From six to eight weeks is the peak of crying.

You might begin to suspect that your baby has some kind of digestive problem, because of all the crying. It's typical for babies in this window to cry every evening for a period of time. If you can soothe them eventually and stop the crying, it's not colic, even if you have to do things like take them out for a walk, drive them around, put them strapped into a carseat on top of the running clothes dryer, wear them in a front carrier and bounce around the room, sing a certain song, or do any other thing you previously thought parents were dumb for giving in to. If you can't soothe them at all, it's colic.

If you can physically move comfortably, find some regular outings that involve other babies and parents. There are drop-in discussion groups and breastfeeding support groups and storytimes and all sorts of other things you can do in your area. You're going for you, not the baby, so don't talk yourself out of it by saying the baby doesn't need it at that age--of course the baby doesn't. But you need the external stimulation and adult company, and other people with other babies to provide data points so you're not in an echo chamber with your baby.

Even if you don't like an activity you go to, you might meet people you want to spend more time with. New parenthood is one of those times in life (like college or moving to a new city when you're 22) in which it's easy to make friends because everyone's in the same vulnerable spot. Pretty much anyone with a kid close to your kid's age will want to hang out for a "playdate" (code for "let's drink coffee and compare notes on diaper changes") just because everyone needs friends. Accept invitations and make invitations, and you'll end up sifting through people until you find some that you like to spend time with. Those will be your "parent friends" and they'll be your social circle and activity



friends for years. It's worth putting in the effort to go out and make and accept invitations.

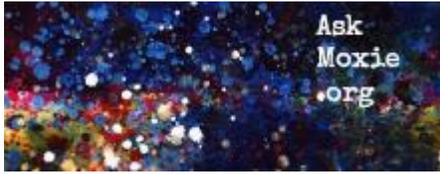
What is your job in weeks six through eight? Start to exercise again, even just walking outside. Sleep whenever you can. Drink a lot of water. Interact with your baby. If your baby likes to be worn, strap your baby to you and start going outside and doing things, or doing things around the house. Try not to take the crying personally (it truly is just a stage). Work on regaining your body and strength. Go out and show up at things, and accept and make invitations to hang out with other parents to form your tribe.

From eight to 12 weeks your baby is starting to put it together and settle into a routine. Awake for a couple of hours, then a short nap, then awake, then a nap. They may start sleeping more at night, and by 12 weeks might even be "sleeping through the night." Which sounds great, except that the medical definition of sleeping through the night is sleeping five hours in a row. Whomp whomp. (Or your baby could be sleeping longer. Sleeping three-hour chunks is normal at this age, as is sleeping a 12-hour stretch. Babies sleep differently and they develop into their mature sleeping patterns at different rates. Lots of kids don't sleep alllll the way through the night until well over a year, so if yours does, be happy.)

Your baby will also start to be more interactive. Smiling at everyone, expecting things that are routines, recognizing different people and turning to them when they speak. Babies this age are starting to get receptive language, so if you feel like it, narrate what you're doing with your baby while you're doing it. It may seem silly at first, but after a few weeks you'll just think it's normal, and then your baby will start understanding what you're saying (well before they can speak back) and you'll know you're helping them make sense of the world.

There's another growth spurt at 12 weeks. It will probably be less severe than the first two growth spurts, but you will still notice it. Once your baby is through that growth spurt, sleep will be consolidated even more.

What is your job in weeks eight through 12? Sleep when you can. Drink a lot of water. Keep exercising, walking outside, and making sure you get sun. Bring your baby outside every day when the weather is decent. Make contact with other parents and socialize with them so you can interact with other adults going through the same things you are. Feedings should be easier by now and you won't have to be as vigilant about



each feeding going well. The crying should be calming down, and your baby will seem more comfortable in the world.

This is the end of the “fourth trimester” and as your baby comes into the 13th and 14th weeks you’ll see a change in interactiveness, and looking more like a baby and less like a newborn. Note: It is not unusual for a baby to start waking up more between weeks 14 and 18. It’s the four month sleep regression, and it’s caused by developmental leaps.

Once the four-month sleep regression passes, the next few months are largely just getting to know your baby more and more, and your baby growing skills and capabilities (and size!). Remember that your baby’s receptive language is much greater than you think it is, so keep talking and explaining to your baby as you go through your days, and your baby will gain fluency in living your daily life even before they can sign or talk to you. And remember that your baby still needs to be held a lot and also to have plenty of time on the floor, even when they’re able to sit in a seat or saucer. You do NOT need to play special games or focus on your child all the time, but you do need to respond and interact when your child is in a period of communication and interaction. Your child’s sleep and mood will get better and better, but not in a linear way--a few steps forward and then another step or two back. In order for there to be secure attachment there needs to be small conflict that you then recover from, so doing everything perfectly and never having either of you be upset would be counterproductive anyway.

Courage. You can do it.