

# Things to do with your baby: the first six months

by Kathy Stirrup

*Nine months of pregnancy ✓*

*Spent a small fortune on all the equipment required for a small person: clothing, nappies and changing stuff, pram, bath, cot, bassinet, etc. ✓*

*Birthed a baby ✓*

*Ran the rampart of conflicting advice on baby care and feeding from the hospital, assorted relatives and friends ✓*

*Survived those first days, or weeks, at home in a haze of birth recovery, sleep deprivation, new routines, and endless feeding ✓*

Now what to do with this new little person when they AREN'T sleeping or eating?

Many people go into parenthood these days having had very little to do with a small person. If they are lucky they have given a friend's or relatives baby a few hugs, but now they are given full charge of a new little life, sent home to look after this precious person all on their own. It's hard enough getting your head around the feeding and the sleeping and the general care of this little life, knowing how to constructively fill in the awake time may just feel overwhelming.

What follows are a variety of ideas of things to do with a baby from birth to six months. Each baby is unique and develops at their own rate, there is a big range in what's considered "normal" development, so don't be concerned if at first your little one doesn't seem engaged in the activities. Try something else, try the activity again at a different time of day or later stage. Just like with us adults, babies will have preferences for the things that engage them, and they will have some things that they master more quickly than others.

## Talking

It might sound like an obvious activity, but sometimes we get caught up doing things for our babies and forget to talk with them. Talk to them as you are doing the everyday tasks required for looking after them, nappy time especially gives an ideal opportunity for a chat or song (they don't care if you are opera trained or not) Talking with your little one helps them to feel loved and cared for, it can relax you both, and in talking with them you are teaching them a basic skill in connecting with others – how to communicate. The patterns and rhythms of conversation and singing help your little person gain listening skills and language development. Apart from this, talking or singing with your little one also helps you both develop a good attachment relationship, and helps them with their eye contact and development. Talk about what you are doing or planning on doing. Talk about the people in their world, sing nursery rhymes or your favourite pop song, the main thing is that you are engaging with them in a way that says, "you are important and loved".

## Baby games

*Raspberry Kisses.* Blow a soft raspberry on your baby's foot or tummy. Watch your baby carefully to gauge their level of enjoyment of the game and stop when they tell you that they have had enough – usually by pulling away.

*Other games:* You can also kiss your baby, gently stroke your baby, say your baby's name, and make funny faces with your baby. You might also try lying your baby on your bent knees and swaying them from side to side or gently bouncing them as you sing to them. Babies often are fascinated by hands and fingers, after washing your hands you can try wiggling your fingers and then allow them to explore them with their eyes or their own fingers when they are slightly older. You might want to use finger rhymes like "Two little dickie birds", "open shut them" or "where is pointer?" Down the other end of your baby – you might like to play with your baby's toes. Gently kiss them or tickle them or use some nursery rhymes such as "This little piggy" or "Shoe a little horse".

You will see your baby watching you carefully, learning how to respond to you. These kind of interactions help your little one learn social skills, they build their self-esteem and develop their trust.

*Rattles and Squeaky toys:* Use a rattle or squeaky toy to gain your baby's attention. You can buy a great variety in the stores or you can easily make your own using a plastic container such as a water bottle and filling it with different objects such as dried beans, lentils, pebbles, pasta, or buttons. Different objects will create different sounds so you might like to try a variety so that your little one is exposed to various sounds. Fasten the lid on securely to the bottle when you have placed the objects inside and secure with some tape. Check regularly to make sure that the lid stays securely in place. Rattles help a baby with their eye development as they track the rattles, later it helps them with their hand-eye coordination as they learn to shake and move the rattle around. Rattles also help them with head movement as they work to turn towards the sound.

## **Baby Massage**

Baby massage is a wonderful interaction to do with your baby. Before or after bath time is an opportune moment for doing this activity with them. All you need is a warm room, a dry towel and some baby oil or moisturising cream. You can use your change table or place them onto your knees as you sit on a sofa. Warm your hands up a little then pop a few drops of the baby oil or cream into your hands and gently stroke down your baby's arms and legs. Turn your baby onto their tummy and massage their back with smooth strokes, keeping continuous contact with your baby's skin with one hand or the other. Talk softly to your little one as you go. At first this interaction is likely to only last a few minutes, but you will be able to build up time spent doing this as they get older if they are enjoying it. If they seem unhappy, stop and try again another time.

## **Out and about**

Babies usually like being outdoors in the open air, it's also good for their mums or dads to be out of the confines of four walls too. Try walking around outside with your baby in a pram or a carrier. Talk to them about what you can see around you. If you have a garden you might like to try putting your little one down for a nap outside in their pram in a shaded area where you can keep an eye on them.

## **Tummy time**

Tummy time is important for your little person's development but not all babies embrace this time with enthusiasm at first. When just starting out just one or two minutes is enough, if they start to get unhappy just pick them up and try again at a later time.

Some things that might help with this time are:

Rolling up a small towel or blanket and laying your baby's shoulders and arms just over the roll so that they aren't flat on the floor, this makes it slightly easier for them to lift up their heads; say their name and make funny faces or funny sounds and mimic back any funny sounds or faces they might

be making; sing to them and make sure they know you are nearby. As they get slightly older you can move about from one side of the to the other so that they have to work to track you, or use an object such as a rattle or a bright coloured or favourite toy to move back and forth slowly so that they need to work to follow it. You might also like to prop up a small mirror in front of your baby so that they can see their own reflection.

Tummy time helps them with their upper body development. It helps with eye contact. It helps with mimicking and listening skills. It also helps with building attachment and trust.

## **Mirror time**

Young babies are often fascinated with faces, especially their own, even though at this stage it is thought that they don't recognise their face as being their own. Hold your baby in front of the mirror. Point and smile at your baby's reflection. You might say something like "Look, there's you" or "Look, there's (baby's name)". Wait for your baby's reactions and if they smile then give them a big smile back. You might also name different body parts, pointing at them or gently touching them. Mirror play gives opportunity for your baby to: study faces; mimic facial expressions; mimic sounds; read your emotions; express emotions. It helps them in building self-esteem, in listening and mimicking and in developing good attachment and trust relationships. Other ways in which you can expand on this activity might include playing peek-a-boo using the mirror by angling your, or their face in and out of view. You might also look at photo albums containing their own photos or photos of people who they know. You can talk about who they are, or maybe about the emotions being shown on the faces. You could do the same with pictures of people's faces from magazines or newspapers.

## **Name Games**

Say your baby's name often, repeating it for as long as they seem interested. You can play a game by whispering their name in one ear and then swapping to the other ear. Before long your baby might start to turn around or smile when they hear their name. You can play Peepo using their name, "where is (baby's name)?" and then "There's (baby's name)". Refer often to yourself as "Mummy" or "daddy" or whatever name you are wanting them to call you to help them learn what to call you. These kind of interactions help with building self-esteem, they help with developing a good attachment and trust relationship and they help your baby feel unique and special.

## **Roly Poly**

Babies often enjoy the sensation of rolling even before they can do so by themselves. Help your baby to develop this skill by gently rolling them over on to their tummies and then back again to their backs. Make sure that the surface that you have placed your little one on is a soft surface such as a rug or blanket. Keep going as long as your baby seems to be enjoying the activity. When your baby starts to make attempts at rolling themselves then you can encourage them to do so by putting toys just out of their reach so that they have to move to reach it. Babies can begin to roll at all different ages but an average age of beginning to roll is around three to four months. Apart from the obvious skill of rolling, this activity can also help with whole body strength and coordination, and with developing a good attachment relationship with your little one.

## **Book time**

Babies are never too young to begin looking at books. Choose simple books to start with, often ones with good contrasting colours such as blacks and white or bright bold patterns. Read and turn the pages slowly talking about each page. Go at your baby's pace so that they have time to take in the sounds, colours, pictures and patterns. Soon your baby might like to try more interactive books that

they can pat and feel, board or cloth books are good for this. When your little one loses interest, put the book away.

## **Touchy Feely**

Gather different textured objects or materials such as a furry toy or a silky scarf. Gently rub them on your baby's tummy or hands or face. Talk about the different textures using words such as "smooth", "silky", or "fuzzy" As they get older you might introduce slightly rougher objects for them to explore with their hands and expand their vocabulary with words such as "rough" or "bumpy" There are quite a number of children's touchy feely books available that you could use as well as items in everyday life. Toys or books that allow your child to explore different sounds such as "crinkly" or "squeaky" or "rustly" are also fun in helping them investigate and learn about their world. These activities help your child learn about different textures and sounds. It helps them with their language development and with their eye-hand coordination. It helps them with their listening skills and their tracking and eye development.

## **Baby exercises**

Many young babies enjoy being able to move their limbs. At first they have very little control over their body in their movements but gradually with time and practice they learn to master intentional body movement. When your baby is awake and alert you can help them practice these skills. Let your baby stand on your knees while you hold her chest or waist to support them. Only do this if your little one has control to hold their head without it flopping about. You can bounce them up and down gently for a few minutes or just let them stand before letting them sit back down again. Many little ones really enjoy being in a supported standing position. Another activity that you could do is to place your baby on a mat on the floor or on a changing mat and move their legs in a gentle cycling motion, or gently move their legs from a knees up position to a legs stretched position and repeat. You can also move your baby's arms out and in from their body or in a gentle rowing position.

As said earlier, these activities help your baby to learn to have control over their body. They strengthen your little one's body and help them with coordination.

## **Mobiles and baby gyms**

Mobiles are great for giving babies something interesting to look at while they are lying on their backs. They help them with their visual development. You can use store bought ones or you can make your own using paper, feathers, leaves or shiny objects such as tinsel or old CD's or foil. Tie the objects to some string and fix them so that they can turn and move, but make sure that they can't be reached by your little one and check regularly to make sure they are still firmly fixed in place.

Baby gyms are great for entertaining babies who can't yet sit up. You can use a store bought one or make them yourself using different baby toys or rattles. Hang them so that your little one can see them. As time goes on they might start to try and bat at them with their hands or their feet.

Baby gyms help little ones with their visual development, they help with the development of eye-hand and eye-foot coordination.

## **Dancing baby**

Music and dancing can be a great way to calm both baby and yourself if your baby is fretful, or just for the fun of it. Put on some music or just sing. Hold your baby against your body with their head on your shoulder. Sway gently from side to side or step or jiggle rhythmically around the room in time to the music. You might like to pat your little one gently on their back or bottom in time with the music.

You could also sit on the ground with your baby on your raised legs and bounce them or play with their arms and legs in time with the music.

This activity can help with developing positive attachment with your little one. It can help them with listening, it can also help them with gaining a sense of rhythm and in learning to appreciate different types of music.

## **Sit ups**

From about four months you can help your baby with their upper body strength and core strength, and in learning to sit up with practicing baby sit ups. Whilst they are laying on a rug on the floor or on a change mat, put your fingers in the palms of their hands and when they grab hold gently pull them up into a sitting position then gently lower them back down to lying again. You can give them warning of what you are about to do by saying something like “uppies” or “up we go” before you pull them upright. Always make sure that your little one has the control to bring their head up with their body whilst doing this movement. If their head lags back too much stop and try again at another time of day or later stage in development. This activity helps your baby to develop their upper body strength and their arm strength. Your little one needs to be able to lift their head and have control over their back and shoulders before they can learn to sit up.

## **Sitting up**

Once your baby starts to show signs of wanting to sit up, usually somewhere around the six month stage, build them a support wall of cushions as this will help them stay upright. The boomerang cushions can be excellent for this. Baby gyms and toys that your baby can hold onto such as rattles or stacking rings, or textured or crinkly toys can all help keep your baby occupied while they are practicing their sitting skills. Older siblings’ antics can also provide great entertainment.

Supported and later non supported sitting up can help your little one with their upper body and their core strength. It can also help with their eye-hand and eye-foot coordination. Sitting up can also help them with their social interaction skills.

There are lots of different things that you can do with your little one in filling both your days and in helping with their development. I have listed just a few of them to get you started. This time with your new bub can at times feel daunting and overwhelming. It is often a steep learning curve and time can easily be filled with feeding, sleeping and surviving. I have heard many people say, “I can’t wait till they are older and can do more” but the fact is they are learning and developing in leaps and bounds at this stage of development, there is a vast difference between a newborn and a six month old. It’s a really important time in establishing positive attachment relationships of trust with this new little family member. Time flies by so very quickly, enjoy.

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*Kathy Stirrup, alongside her daughter Alexandra Newmarch, runs Phoenix Place, a counselling, play therapy and mothercraft agency in the south of Sydney ([www.phoenixplace.com.au](http://www.phoenixplace.com.au)). Kathy has trained as a Mothercraft Nurse, Child Care Worker, Counsellor and Play Therapist, and has had over 30 years of experience working with children and their families. Kathy also has a family of her own with two now grown-up children and a teenager, and has recently welcomed her first grandchild.*