

7 secrets to surviving your baby's first year

Babies are demanding little creatures. They test us physically, mentally and emotionally. They provoke incredible joy, profound love, and astounding gratification, but they also trigger exasperation, frustration, anger, and anxiety. You may be unprepared for such an emotional ride. Here are seven ways to cope with the highs and the lows...

1. Filter advice

New parents are prime targets for advice. Health-care professionals, the media, advertisers, family, friends and your next door neighbour all have opinions about how you should care for your baby, and often they are contradictory. 'Don't let your baby cry.' 'Let your baby cry.' 'Let her feed for as long as she likes'. 'Stop feeding after 10 minutes'. When the advice helps you tackle the problem, then it is constructive, but when it conflicts with your own views, you may question yourself and lose confidence.

There are as many different ways to raise children, as there are people doing it. You need to discover your way. Sometimes this involves backing yourself rather than running to the professionals, your mum, or your best friend. Not all opinion is untrustworthy, but you have opinions too, and your opinions count.

2. Sleep when you can

The hazards of sleep deprivation - feeling bad-tempered, irritated, teary, clumsy, forgetful and all together half-human - are new parents' biggest grievance. Babies do not conveniently enter the world ready to sleep eight hours a night to fit in with our sleeping patterns, so new parents talk incessantly about wrapping techniques, bedtime rituals, and sleeping arrangements in the hope of finding some magical solution to buy everyone more rest.

Most attempts to mould baby sleep patterns are ineffective or temporary, so your best solution is to help yourself. Instead of waking to check if your baby is still breathing, or sleeping lightly so you do not miss your baby's cries, or tossing and turning worrying about when you may need to wake again, you need to sleep. Instead of putting on another load of washing, or cooking dinner, or dusting the lounge room when your baby is napping, you need to rest. The only solution to your sleep deprived haze is to sleep when you can, and expect that, for now, you will not function as effectively as someone who gets eight hours of uninterrupted sleep a night.



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3. Expect change

A baby's first year involves phenomenal change. He transforms from a newborn who eats, sleeps and cries, to a one-year old that laughs, smiles and crawls (or walks). In twelve months, he learns to clap, pick up blocks and crash them together, pull himself up to standing, squish peas between his fingers, eat mashed pumpkin with a spoon, babble and coo, and say mum-a and dad-a. His height and weight triples. He sleeps less and plays more.

Just when you feel like you understand your baby's habits, he will reach another developmental stage and everything will change. What you have come to rely upon – the settling technique, the rice cereal for breakfast, or the 2 hour afternoon sleep – may no longer work. Today is unlikely to be like yesterday or tomorrow. Your baby changes so you must change too. Respond to how your baby is behaving now, rather than how you expect him, or want him to behave.

4. Do not compare

We often compare our baby to other babies. Why isn't she rolling/sitting/crawling like my best friend's baby? Why won't she sleep through the night like all the other babies in my mum's group? Her cousin loves his pureed vegetables. Why doesn't she?

Easy, your baby is an individual. She has her preferences and she develops in her own time, regardless of your expectations or the behaviour of other babies. That is why babies are so fascinating. They all travel a similar path, but they do it in their own unique way. So instead of worrying, marvel at the amazing personality and skills she is developing, and live and learn with your baby.

5. Embrace your new self

Having a baby is a major life adjustment. When you become a mother, you become a different person. You experience new emotions – the enormous pride of watching your baby first bum shuffle across the floor, the irrational fear of someone or something harming your baby, and the dreaded conflict of wanting to seek self-fulfilment from activities that exclude your baby. These experiences change you.

- Motherhood happens overnight, but do not expect to adjust overnight. You need time to embrace your new life and your new self, and you need time to let go of your former life and your former self.

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6. Accept help

Once, babies were raised by an entire village. Now, we expect a mother and a father to cover the role. This is not only unrealistic, it is unreasonable. Babies thrive amongst loving parents, but they also thrive amongst loving grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, neighbours, health professionals, child care workers, and even shop assistants.

Caring for a baby can be a lonely, isolating experience. Meeting other people with babies, finding time for yourself, and sharing the workload, helps you to be a better parent. Do not be afraid to accept help or ask for help. Like your baby, you need support too.

7. See the big picture

Meeting your baby's needs is an hourly and daily activity, but living so intensely in the day to day may sometimes obscure the complete picture. You can get bogged down in the detail. A day without endless nappy changes, hours of rocking, patting, soothing, and a night with uninterrupted sleep may be unimaginable.

Your baby's first year is an intense and challenging time, but it does not last forever. Your baby grows at a rapid rate. Soon your baby will be a toddler, mixing mud pies in the backyard, and throwing tantrums in the supermarket. Soon you will be packing his school lunches and taxiing him around to after-school soccer and band practice. Welcome every day with your baby because it does not last forever.

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