

Tips to promote infant development in the hospital

Samantha Butler, PhD, and Terra Lafranchi, MSN, RN, NP-C



The tips below were designed to promote your baby's development throughout their hospital stay. These tips may need to be changed based on your baby's medical status and their unique and changing individual needs. Your baby's bedside nurse and care team will help decide the best timing for you to try some of these ideas.

- » **Try to create a quiet and calm environment for your baby to heal from surgery.** Lower voices, phone rings, music, TV and other noises next to your baby's bed. Also try to dim bright lights when possible.
- » **Give your baby boundaries, like they had in the womb, so they feel support on all sides of their body.** Use rolled blankets as bumpers around your baby to support arms and legs. When possible, hold and place your baby on their side with their arms and legs tucked in. Bring soft blankets and soft stuffed animals to the bedside to support positioning and comfort.
- » **Take your time when caring for your baby and take frequent breaks which will allow your baby to stay calm during care.** When your baby is over-stimulated, they may yawn, stick their tongue out, stretch out their arms and legs, and stretch out their fingers. These behaviors are good signals to pause and give your baby a break. Put your hands around your baby or hold your baby until they relax.
- » **Hold your baby either in your arms or ideally on your chest and give skin-to-skin comforting when possible.** Your baby will feel more safe with your touch. There is nothing your baby would rather have than you supporting their care. Even when your baby needs to stay in their crib, gently touch or place your hands around them. Most babies are sensitive after surgery and like your hands placed on them or holding them with little movement. They often find petting or stroking over-stimulating. If your baby is stable, the time before surgery is a wonderful time to hold and cuddle your baby as much as possible because there may be several days after surgery when you may not be able to hold your baby.
- » **Offer your baby a pacifier during caregiving.** Most babies settle by sucking on a pacifier. They also enjoy sucking on their own fingers. You can help them bring their hands to their mouth.
- » **Offer items to hold in their hands such as a soft blanket, stuffed animal, or your finger.**
- » **Talk and sing to your baby in a soft voice.** Babies like to hear the voices of their parents. They are familiar with your voice from within the womb.
- » **Leave a soft cloth that smells like you for your baby when you cannot be with them.** Babies know and enjoy the smell of their parents. You can tuck the cloth in your shirt for a few minutes before leaving it for your baby.
- » **Read, sing, talk and make eye contact with your newborn baby to help with brain development.** The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Center for Media and Child Health strongly discourage television viewing for children younger than 2 years of age. Our hospital has books that you can borrow to read to your baby. Bring photographs of your family and drawings for soft decoration of your baby's crib.
- » **As soon as medically possible, hold your baby during all feedings.** Feeding is a social activity, and babies enjoy being held during eating, even when taking in their food by a feeding tube.
- » **Offer a pacifier during tube feedings so that your baby can start to learn that sucking leads to a full belly.** Sucking will also provide saliva which aides in digestion.
- » **If possible, give breast milk for your baby.** Pumping is often needed to give breast milk to the baby after surgery. Most babies benefit from breast milk during their hospital stay.
- » **Practice breastfeeding as soon as possible.** Allow your baby to "practice" breast-feeding even if they are not fully feeding by mouth. Practice breastfeeding by putting your baby in position to breastfeed, and allow your baby to nuzzle at the breast during skin-to-skin holding with mother.
- » **Ask for a lactation consult as soon as possible, even before your baby is ready to feed by mouth.** Lactation is helpful in supporting the mother who is pumping.