

Baby Cues and Sensory Development

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We all take in information through our seven senses: sight, sound, taste, smell, balance/movement (Vestibular sense) and information from our muscles and joints (proprioceptive sense).

Our sensory systems begin to develop in utero. The touch (tactile) sense begins to develop at 8 weeks gestation.

From birth babies begin to make sense of the world around them through their senses. They turn their heads towards sound, follow objects with their eyes and become more aware of their hands and feet. As they grow they become more aware of their environment and start to explore through the use of their hands, developing hand-eye co-ordination as they learn to take objects to their mouths.

Sensory experiences are essential for the development of a child's central nervous system.

As a baby's brain matures and develops it learns to integrate sensory information and screen out excess sensory information to enable them to organise themselves.

Babies that are born prematurely can often have more difficulty with processing sensory information.

If your baby is coping with a sensory experience they may show they are regulating themselves or show cues of:

- A healthy colour
- Bringing their hands together
- Smooth body movements
- Moving their hands to their face
- Grasped hands
- Hand to mouth
- Sucking
- Softly flexed posture
- Responsive smiling
- Settling self
- Smoothly transition between drowsy-awake-sleep states

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Your baby may show signs they are becoming overloaded by sensory information by showing certain cues of:

- Sticking their tongue out
- Sudden movement
- Arms positioned away from the body
- Fussing/Crying
- Splayed hands
- Looking away
- Overly staring eyed look
- A change in their breathing pattern
- Skin colour changes e.g. mottled/flushed/dusky
- Straining
- Yawning
- Hiccoughs
- Squirming
- Arching in their back

These strategies can be used throughout the day:

Baby Massage: Baby massage is very good for all babies. It can help calm 'fussy' babies, help improve sleep patterns, and improve wind and constipation. It is also

a fun and enjoyable way to communicate and spend time with your baby. There are different types of baby massage available. Ask your Therapists or Health Visitor what is available in your area. Try to spend some time each day holding your baby close to you. If they find it difficult to settle wrap them in a blanket first. Keep your arms around them and gently rock. Try to do this in a warmer room.

Try having a baby blanket on the changing mat. This can help to keep baby warm and feeling secure.

Still/Positive Touch: Positive touch is good for babies who are overwhelmed by massage. Your child may not tolerate such a stimulating action of massage. Still touch/static touch can be used to comfort your baby. Try light or firm touch, place an out stretched hand on the back of your baby's head and one on their feet.

Dummy: This may be useful when you have finished feeding your baby but they continue to want to suck. The dummy may also help them to cope with difficult daily cares e.g. nappy change.

Kangaroo care / Skin-to-skin contact: A good way for your baby to have their tummy time whilst on mum's chest.

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Nesting: This is creating a 'nest' around your baby as they are lying on their back, using rolled-up towels or small blankets. Having your baby's head and feet resting against a surface may help them

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Grasping: Offer your baby your finger or the edge of a blanket to grasp on to. You can also bring your baby's hand to their tummy or chest and place it down upon their clothing, to help them to grasp it.

Enable hand to mouth: When holding your baby or laying them down, make sure they are able to free their hands themselves to bring them to their face or mouth.

Baths: If your baby enjoys baths, having baths more often may be pleasurable and relaxing for them.

Swaddling: Swaddling is wrapping your baby to help them feel safe and secure. It can

keep them from being disturbed by their startle reflex, and help settle your baby down when they are over stimulated. If your baby is swaddled they won't usually need another blanket on top. If your baby tries to kick off the covers or becomes upset it's a sign they do not appreciate being swaddled.