



Reading your baby's body language

All babies, even those who are born early have ways to show us how they are feeling.

By watching your baby's body language, you will learn to recognise when they feel happy and content, when they are tired or when they may need some help and support from you. Your baby will have their own unique ways of communicating to you using different signs or behaviours that express how they feel. These are called 'behavioural cues'.

The chart below describes some common behavioural cues and some suggestions for how you may respond to them.

Body language/behaviour	What your baby may be saying	What you can do to help
Arching body, flailing or jerky movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm uncomfortable. • I'm having trouble organising my movements. • I'm feeling a bit lost in this space. 	Help baby into a curled-up position. Gently hold their arms together on chest (containment). Offer them your finger to hold. Try swaddling.
Startles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am being moved too quickly. • That noise or bright light gave me a fright. 	Slow down the way you handle your baby. Reduce noise. Avoid bright sudden light. Keep baby swaddled whilst lifting.
Covering eyes or ears with hands, making stop sign with extended hand, frowning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's too bright. • It's too noisy. • There's too much activity. • I'm being handled too much. • The handling is too fast. 	Check the environment - can anything be improved for baby's comfort? For example, can baby's eyes be shaded, can a blind be closed? You can also be slow and gentle with handling baby and make sure they are getting breaks.

Body language/behaviour	What your baby may be saying	What you can do to help
Irregular breathing, colour changes, yawning, hiccupping or repeated sneezes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am having some trouble managing the current activity. 	<p>If you can, hold your baby close to you and limit over stimulation.</p> <p>Gently hold their arms together on chest (containment).</p> <p>Position your baby so they can get their hands to their mouths or offer a dummy.</p>
Looking hyper alert with wide eyes, a panicked look	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am having trouble coping with so much visual stimulation, for example a toy or mobile or a face. 	<p>Move your face away or look away. Are there too many toys or pictures around?</p> <p>Contain your baby with a firm cuddle or swaddling.</p>
Closing eyes, averting eyes or turning face away	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a lot of visual stimulation and I am giving myself a break. 	<p>This is a good strategy; allow your baby to have a break.</p>
Holding hands together or up to face, sucking hand, tucking up into curled position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am helping myself to feel very comfortable. 	<p>Your baby is helping to calm themselves and feel comfortable.</p> <p>Help them by providing good positioning and support.</p>
*Smiling, alert face *Relaxed calm face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am helping myself to feel very comfortable 	<p>This is a good time to chat and play with your baby.</p>

*These signs are more likely as your baby reaches term age.

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

Support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

1800 737 732 (24-hour support service)

1800respect.org.au

Do you need an interpreter?



Interpreter

If you need an interpreter, you can ask for one.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.
© The Royal Women's Hospital 2020.