Handle with care

A guide to keeping your baby safe

Babies are fragile and precious – never shake a baby
As a mum or dad, holding your baby close is something you’ll probably naturally want to do right from the earliest days. But you may feel nervous about holding your baby and feel all fingers and thumbs to start with.

Rough handling, especially shaking, is dangerous and can cause serious injuries. But remember, injuries caused by shaking don’t happen accidentally during normal play. So this advice shouldn’t stop you cuddling, playing and doing all the things your baby really enjoys.

We’ve collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to provide you with safe, positive ways of holding and caring for your baby.

Never shake a baby

Why is it so dangerous to shake a baby?

A baby’s head is big and heavy compared to the rest of its body. Unless supported, the head flops around because the neck muscles aren’t yet strong enough to hold it still. Shaking makes the head move back and forth very quickly and with great force. When this happens, tiny blood vessels can tear and bleed inside the baby’s brain, causing one or more of the following:

- blindness
- deafness
- fits
- learning difficulties
- brain damage, or even death.

Can shaking harm older children?

The danger is greatest for babies under 12 months, but shaking can cause the same serious injuries in older babies and toddlers.

Can other kinds of rough handling cause injuries?

Yes, particularly hitting a baby on the head. Throwing babies in the air may seem like fun, but it can be dangerous. Keep to gentle games until children are much older.

Why would anyone shake a baby?

Some parents or carers may lose control and shake their baby in a moment of anger or frustration, especially if the baby cries a lot or has problems feeding. Many don’t realise the damage that shaking can do, and some may even think that it is better than smacking.

Important advice

Even if your baby seems to have stopped breathing, don’t shake them. Doctors advise flicking the soles of the feet, rocking the cot or picking up the baby, with the neck supported.

Remember

It is never OK to shake or smack a baby. If you do ever lose control and shake a baby, get medical help immediately, preferably at your local hospital. A delay could be fatal.
How babies like to be held

Babies also like stroking and gentle massage.

Most of all, babies need to have their heads and necks carefully supported.

What babies don’t like

- Being held with their heads or backs unsupported
- Being held at arms length – this makes babies feel insecure
- Any rough handling, such as being gripped too tightly or having a bottle or dummy pushed into their mouth
- Being picked up very suddenly
- Very rough play
- Shaking – this can cause serious, permanent injuries or even death.

“When our daughter was born she looked so pale and fragile, like a doll. We thought, ‘we can never hurt her’ – and we never did.”

Jo and Chris, parents of Bella, 6

Lying on top of your chest (but avoid this if you have been drinking or smoking)

Cuddled up close to you

Cradled lengthways in your arms – a perfect position for smiling and talking to each other

In a sling – a useful way of keeping close to your baby, with your arms free to do other things

With your arm around their tummy, and their back against your body

Upright looking over your shoulder, with their head supported
Coping with crying

Crying is the only way that your baby can tell you how they feel or what they need. If you’ve done all the obvious checks (hunger, thirst, etc), and the crying doesn’t stop, try:

- cuddling (remember, picking up and cuddling a crying baby isn’t “spoiling”)
- gently rocking your baby in a cradle or pram
- singing
- walking up and down with them in your arms or in a sling
- playing music

However, if the crying seems abnormal for your baby or you think they may be unwell, consult your health visitor.

“To soothe your crying baby, try hanging a wind chime in every room. The tinkling sound will distract and calm them.”

Kelly, mum of Mae, 6 months

If the crying ever feels too much to bear:

- Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Put your baby down in a safe place like a cot or pram and go into another room, but go back to check your baby if they become quiet. To calm yourself down, sit for a few minutes, perhaps with a cup of tea and the TV or radio to help take your mind off the crying. Once you feel calmer, go back to your baby.
- Ask a friend or relative to take over for a while.
- Try not to get angry with your baby as this will only make the crying worse.
- Never let things get so bad that you feel desperate. There are lots of ways you can get help. Talk to your health visitor or ring one of the contacts listed in the Who can help? section of this leaflet.

“Ignore old-fashioned theories you might hear about ‘spoiling’ your baby with too much love and attention. Babies thrive and develop well with lots of affection.”

Eileen Hayes, NSPCC parenting advisor

Who can help?

Local services
For advice about any aspect of caring for your baby, talk to your health visitor or GP. In an emergency ring 999, or go to the nearest hospital that has an Accident & Emergency department if you know exactly where it is and can get there quickly.

Bluebell at ParentLine Scotland
Scotland’s first postnatal depression telephone helpline.
0800 3457 457

Cry-sis
Provides support and advice regarding excessively crying or sleepless babies.
www.cry-sis.org.uk
08451 228 669

Parenting Across Scotland
www.parentingacrossscotland.org

Parents Advice Centre (Northern Ireland)
www.parentsadvicecentre.org
0808 8010 722

Parentline Plus
www.parentlineplus.org.uk
0808 800 2222
(including ParentLine Scotland)

Something else you might find useful
Provides useful tips, practical advice and helpful contacts for parents of new babies, as well as interactive areas where parents can keep notes, photographs and mementos charting the first year of their baby’s life.
When you’re worried about a child, talk to us.

Whatever your concern, the NSPCC Helpline is here to offer help, advice and support. You don’t have to say who you are.

Call 0808 800 5000 or email help@nspcc.org.uk

If you are in Scotland you can also contact the National Child Protection Helpline

A 24-hour helpline providing information about what steps to take if you are concerned about a child.

Call 0800 022 3222 or visit www.infoscotland.com/childprotection

More advice from the NSPCC

Our parenting pack

If you’ve found this leaflet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like keeping your cool when stressed or angry and encouraging better behaviour.

To request a pack, please send an A4 SAE (with £2 in stamps), mentioning the parenting pack, to NSPCC Publications, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH or download copies from www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting

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In consultation with

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.