

Oxford Craniofacial Unit

# **COMMUNICATING WITH A BABY WHO WAS BORN PREMATURELY**

**Information for parents and carers**



Babies that are born prematurely might spend some time in the Neonatal Unit. Talking and communicating with your baby from when they are first born will help you get to know your baby.

The combination of your voice and physical contact with your baby will help their development and create a bond between the both of you.

Babies that are born prematurely often need lots of rest and sleep, but there are still many opportunities to communicate with them.

Communication is not just talking; you can touch your baby, make eye contact and use facial expressions to communicate with them.

Babies start communicating long before they can speak. As soon as your baby is born they are listening and will soon learn to hear and recognise the sound of your voice. This means it is important for you to keep talking.

## Top tips for communicating

Babies who are premature need time to develop attention skills. It takes a lot of effort for them to concentrate, so it is important to be aware of the environment when you try to communicate with your baby. Try to avoid distractions of light and noise.

Very young babies send us messages. As you and your baby get to know each other, it is important to learn to read these messages. As you respond to your baby's messages, they will learn the foundations for communication development.

Your baby will also send you messages if they are not feeling like interacting, as premature babies tire more easily. These messages may be looking away or yawning. As you and your baby get to know each other better, you will be able to read these cues more easily. It is important to read your baby's messages to know if it is a good time to interact, or if they need to rest and be calm.

Your baby may be placed skin-to-skin on your chest, to give them a chance to form a bond with you. During this time, you can talk quietly to your baby and listen to them. If your baby makes a noise, you can respond to them. If your baby is calm, you can also use the time to be quiet and calm with them.

Care routines provide opportunities for you to interact and talk with your baby. Some of these tasks include nappy-changing and tube feeding. Talk to your baby about what you are doing, or sing to them as you do it.

## Nappy changes

### **Language learning opportunities:**

- Body parts, e.g. Say, *"Where is your hand? ... Oh, there is your hand."*
- Action words, e.g. put, lift, stand, sit, turn.

### **Concept learning opportunities:**

- On and off, e.g. *"Jumper goes on", "Shoes come off"*.
- Up and down, e.g. *"Lift your foot up", "Put your arms down"*.

## Bath or wash time

As your baby develops, they will be able to have a bath. Bath times are a great time to bond. Your baby will need your encouragement and voice to help them feel safe, especially the first time.

### **Language learning opportunities:**

- Body parts, e.g. Sing, *"This is the way we wash your toes, wash your toes, wash your toes, ..."*. Repeat with different parts of the body.
- Action words, e.g. *splash, kick, stand, sit, wriggle, turn, lift, find, hold*.

### **Concept learning opportunities:**

- Wet and dry, e.g. *"You're all wet", "Let's get you dry"*.
- In and out, e.g. *"Get in the bath", "Time to get out of the bath"*.

## Singing

Babies love singing. It does not matter if you think that you cannot sing, your baby will still enjoy hearing your voice. Singing can be a nice way to teach your baby words. Hearing the same words sung in the same way each time helps children to learn words.

## Talking with your baby

When your baby makes sounds, listen and copy them. You can take turns. This is the beginning of learning the skills for having a conversation.

Very small babies enjoy holding your finger and the feel of your skin on their body. As your baby holds your finger, you can say their name. The sound of your voice will calm them. You could also use this strategy to introduce other members of your family.

As your baby develops, they will look at you for longer and start to have the ability to see your face more clearly. Smile and respond to your baby.

## Reading and playing

You can read your baby a story. Choose simple baby books to read. Your voice will help your baby relax and fall asleep.

Simple games are a great way to interact with your baby. Some of the best games do not need any toys. As your baby gets stronger you could play games like peek-a-boo, or count your baby's fingers and toes.

## Further advice

If you have any concerns or questions about your child's communication development, please speak to their Speech and Language Therapist.



If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

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