



The Association of Paediatric Chartered Physiotherapists

APCP Information - Awake Time Ideas

Practical advice to help you support your premature infant's early motor development.

Babies born prematurely develop differently to babies born at term. Premature infants are at a greater risk of having delay in their motor development. Common reasons which cause this delay include:

- Their muscles are imbalanced compared to a baby born at term
- Their head shape may not be round, so they tend to favour facing one direction
- They are easily distracted / over stimulated and have problems self-calming

This leaflet has been created for you, as their parents, to show you how you can provide additional support to help them learn new skills in the first few months after their due date. These early skills are gaining good head control; raising their head and chest up when on their tummies with their arms forward; grasping toys and bringing them to their mouth.

Playtime Ideas

Short periods of supervised play will provide your baby with the opportunity to discover how their body works. Choose a time when they are settled and calm. Minimise the noise in the room so they can focus on the activity.

Different muscles work in different positions so vary the positions that you lie your baby in.

Side Lying



This can be carried out on your lap or on the floor. Gravity will help bring both their arms and legs together. They will be able to watch their hands easily in this position.

A rolled towel positioned behind them may be required to stop them rolling backwards and give them added support if they are on the floor.

Placing a toy in front of them will give them something to look at and explore.



On Their Back - Lying on your lap

Bend your knees up and rest your baby in your lap, with their bent legs resting on your tummy. This position encourages them to be curled up and supports their head in the middle.

Talking to your baby will stimulate them to look at you and interact. Cup your hands behind their shoulders to help them bring their hands together, so they can see their hands and start to take them to their face. If they are calm and alert, introduce a soft toy and allow them to feel it with their hands.



If they become unsettled, help them bring their hands together near to their mouth so that they start to learn how to settle themselves.

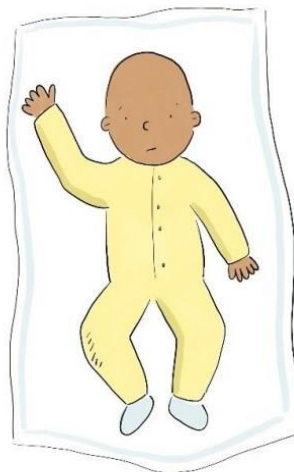
Allow your baby to experience gentle movement whilst feeling supported and secure, by slowly moving them backwards and forwards. As their head control improves you can reduce the amount of support you offer.

Remember to watch your baby for 'cues' indicating that they are getting tired or over stimulated. Try 1 – 2 minutes of interaction before having a rest. Allow them time to rest or by holding them in a different way.

On the floor

If your baby continues to lie with their arms and legs splayed out when they are on their back, they may find it difficult to bring their hands up to explore their face or keep their hands together above their chest.

To help them, position a rolled-up towel around them, under their shoulders and around their thighs. This will support them in a curled-up position with their head in middle.



As they get more active and stronger, they will need less support and will no longer require the rolled-up towel. *This must **not** be used whilst they are sleeping.*



Under a play gym

When your baby starts this new activity, provide additional support by using a rolled-up towel (as above). This will make it easier for them to touch the toys, hit them with better accuracy and for longer before tiring.

Place the play gym over their tummy. Encourage them to keep their head in the middle and look at the toys.

Tummy Time

This describes any position in which your baby is lying on their tummy. It is an excellent way in which to strengthen their neck, back and shoulder muscles. Try and let them have a few minutes on their front each time they wake.

A good way to introduce tummy time is when you are reclined in a chair, and they are lying on their tummy on your chest. By bringing their elbows forward under their shoulders and supporting around the chest they will be able to lift their head up whilst keeping their arms forward. Adapt the amount of assistance you provide as they gain head control.



As their head control improves, they may like these positions. Give extra support around their chest or place a hand on their bottom to keep it down if they are struggling.

This is a useful position for dressing, winding, playing and looking around.

Bring a rolled-up towel or cushion right up to their armpits and keep their arms forward. Encourage them to watch or reach for a toy.



Sitting

This is a good position for your baby when they are fully awake and settled. Ensure they are well supported and sitting symmetrically. Encourage them to look around. Until they gain good head and trunk control only sit them in a chair for short periods as it can restrict their breathing.

If they are starting to look uncomfortable / slumping down or tired, then please take them out of the chair.

Early on, when placed in their chair, your baby may look like the image on the left. Placing a rolled-up towel behind their knees and shoulders will help keep them curled up, with their head in the middle, and feeling more supported.



Using a V cushion supports your baby's posture and allows them the opportunity to look around and explore.

As they develop better head and body control they will start to need less support. You could position them sitting more upright with the V cushion supporting lower down their back, allowing them the opportunity to hold their head up unsupported

Concerned about their development?

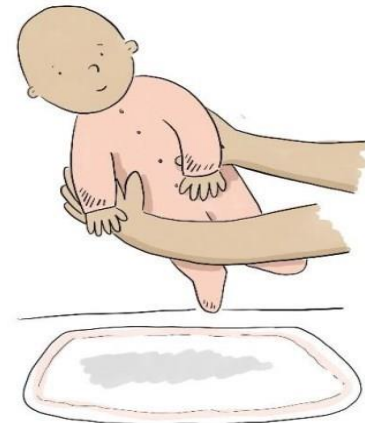
It is worth remembering, that there is a big range of normal when it comes to development. The most important thing is that your baby is progressing and learning new skills. Always use their corrected age when monitoring their development (actual age minus number of weeks they were born early).

However, if you baby is not progressing, has a marked preference to using one side, their arms or legs become very stiff regularly throughout the day or, they always turn their heads in one direction, please raise these concerns with your health visitor / GP / baby's doctor / physiotherapists.

Moving and carrying your baby

Picking up and putting down

To help your baby feel supported and safe (and therefore not stressed) hold them around the chest, then slowly roll them onto their side before you lift them up. This approach allows your baby to practise controlling their neck muscles and retaining a curled-up posture. When it is time to return to the cot, carry out in reverse.



Tuck carry

Your baby will feel very supported and contained. Keep both of their arms pointing forwards, support hips and allow knees to bend. They will be able to see your face clearly in this position so try and get good eye contact.



Shoulder carry

Start with your baby's tummy on your chest (like kangaroo care). As their head control improves carry them high up so they can look over your shoulder.



Forearm carry

Premature babies have often spent a lot of time on their tummies and find it very comforting, especially when unsettled. Your baby may like being carried like this as they can look at their surroundings. Having their hips lower than their head, makes it easier for them to learn to lift their head up.

Sleeping Positions

Official Sudden Infant Death guidelines recommend that your baby sleeps on their back at home, with their feet at the bottom of the bed until they are 12 months corrected age. The cot should be kept clear.

Alternate which way your baby's head faces when you put them down to sleep. Try and approach the cot from different sides, so that your baby gets used to looking in both directions. This may help prevent the head from becoming flatter on one side.

Safe sleep advice can be found on The Lullaby Trust Website:

<https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/>

Please scan the QR Code Below:



Equipment to avoid

Below is a list of equipment that is particularly unsuitable for preterm infants. Research has shown that this equipment can delay babies' development when they are learning to sit and walk.

Baby bouncers and bouncy chairs move when your baby pushes backwards into the chair. It over-strengthens the muscles that arch your baby's back. These arching muscles work against the muscles that keep the babies in an optimal 'curled up' position. Constant bouncing can also make it difficult for babies to learn how to reach accurately for things.

Doorway jumping seats / jumperoos encourage babies to bounce on their toes and arch their backs. Your baby may then find it difficult to learn to sit and be still.

Baby walkers allow babies to walk abnormally, and do not strengthen the muscles needed for sitting, crawling or independent walking. Babies are better off being placed on the floor to learn these skills.

This leaflet has been produced after an initial review of literature and where there is a lack of evidence, a consensus of expert opinion is agreed, correct at time of publication. <https://apcp.csp.org.uk> V4 Re-published March 2024 V4 Review February 2027

The Association of Paediatric Chartered Physiotherapists (APCP) is one of the CSP's largest Professional Networks and continues to thrive with a membership of over 2,900 paediatric members. We encourage our members and support staff to work together to enhance the quality of life, wellbeing and independence of babies', children, and young people that we deliver care to.



The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) is the professional, educational and trade union body for the UK's 64,000 chartered physiotherapists, physiotherapy students and support workers.