Premature Infant Behavior

Introduction

Infants born prematurely are sometimes born with a nervous system poorly equipped to deal with the environment. It becomes important to create an appropriate environment in order for your baby to be able to handle all of the stress he or she has. NICU staff is here to help you understand ways in which your baby is trying to communicate with you through behavior.

Behavior

Preterm infants use body signals to tell us how they are feeling, when they need something, and how they respond to their world. There are three basic types of behavior:

- stress behaviors
- coping behaviors
- self-regulation behaviors

Stress behaviors signal us that the baby is stressed, tired, or overloaded so we can adjust how we interact with them. Coping behaviors show that the baby is adjusting well or coping with what is happening in the environment. Behaviors that babies use to stay in control or to comfort themselves are called self-regulation behaviors. (Please read the handout Development and Behavior of the Premature Baby for a more detailed explanation)

Suggestions for interactions

A preterm infant is quite different from the full-term baby. Premies are sometimes unattractive, less responsive to sights and sounds, irritable and hard to console, and provide weaker and fewer social cues to parents. Parents often feel exhausted with the effort it takes to interact. They may even withdraw when the baby does not respond.

- When you approach your premature infant, remember that all of the baby’s senses are working. Begin slowly and proceed gently, watching for cues. As you come closer to the bed, your baby’s sense of smell will help to identify you. As your baby becomes more alert, he or she will be able to recognize scents of familiar people, especially a parent. Do not wear strong perfume or colognes, as this can be irritating to your baby.

- If the sense of smell does tell your baby that you are near, come close to the baby and speak slowly and softly. Babies are comforted by slow talking and they like higher pitches. As you talk softly, your baby should become more alert. Very small preterm infants may only tolerate brief visits. With these infants talking may be enough. Touching may be over-stimulating. You will know this by watching for cues and signals.
As long as your baby is calm and not showing signs of stress, come closer. To open the doors or portholes of the isolette, gently push in the buttons. Push this button when you close the porthole, as well, to decrease the sound of clicking as the porthole shuts.

Make sure your hands are warm. Touch your baby in a place that is comfortable like the top of the head, palm of the hand, bottom of the foot, or back. Use gentle pressure, as a light touch is sometimes irritating. Initially, premature infants startle easily when first touched which is normal. If your baby startles to your touch, continue to touch with a gentle pressure, until your baby calms. Skin to skin contact is important. It helps your baby learn about the world and about you. This helps you feel closer to your baby.

After your baby gets used to your touch, you can add another sense. You may want to try vision, by allowing him or her to see your face. Babies are very attracted to human faces. Position yourself 8-10 inches from his face so your baby will see you, but not so close to startle your baby. By approaching slowly and allowing your baby to experience one sense at a time (smell, hearing, touch, sight), it will be easier for your baby to learn and he or she will respond better.

Suggestions for calming an irritable baby

In the beginning, you will need to help your baby organize his world. You may need to make changes in the environment by decreasing lights, sounds or touch.

You will often see the NICU nursing staff doing this by turning the lights low, placing blankets over isolettes to decrease light and muffle sounds. They talk softly, and do nursing care so the baby’s sleep is distributed as little as possible.

It is very common for preterm infants to be irritable at times. Since your baby has an immature nervous system, it is sometimes hard to deal with all of the stresses in the NICU. In addition, a lot of energy is needed to grow and survive.

First consider is your baby’s comfort needs:

- Does he have a clean diaper?
- Is he warm enough or too warm?
- Is it close to feeding time. Is he hungry?

If all of the comfort needs are satisfied, look at the environment next:

- Is it too noisy?
- Is it too bright or is there too much light?

You may need to just hold the baby up against you quietly, without other stimulation, such as movement or talking.

Next, gently approach their senses:

- Speak softly to the baby.
Swaddle him firmly in a blanket. Bring his arms and legs close to his body.

- Offer your finger for him to either hold or grasp onto, or to suck on.
- Offer a pacifier.
- Stroke your baby’s head gently, but with a firm touch, from his forehead to his neck. Stroke slowly.
- Pat your baby’s back or chest. Sometimes skin to skin contact will be truly comforting. Also, try using gentle pressure over the back or chest.
- Some babies will calm with rocking, either in your arms, or while being held in a rocking chair. Others will prefer more intense rocking and will calm in an infant swing. If an infant swing is used, the baby needs to be supported at the sides and neck. For some babies, however, rocking can be overstimulating and stressful, making the baby more irritable. Therefore it becomes important to watch your baby’s behavior, to be sure he or she is not stressed.

As your baby grows and becomes more stable, he will begin to be able to help calm himself, and he will begin to show coping and self-regulation behaviors. As he gets closer to going home, he will become more alert and better able to deal with his world.

**Suggestions to increase your baby’s alertness**

As your baby grows and matures, he will begin to have longer periods of alertness, and will be ready for more social interaction.

- Approach your infant slowly. Start by talking to him softly and slowly. Vary the tones of your voice, using mainly high pitches. As you watch his behavior, and as he tolerates your voice, begin by touching him gently.

- As long as he tolerates your touch, either swaddle him in a blanket or bring his arms/legs up against his body. Once he is secure with this position, gently sit him up. Be sure to support him at his head/neck and around his chest/back. Bringing a baby to an upright position will sometimes be all that is needed to make him alert. Swaddling decreases movement which may interfere with his alertness.

- As long as he is showing “approach” behaviors and is not stressed, come closer about 8-10 inches from him, so he can see you. At first keep a calm look and do not change your expression. Allow him time to focus on your face. Back away slightly if he starts to look away and let him rest. As he calms, move closer again. This time, try to imitate his expressions. Again, back away slowly and let him rest. After he calms, move closer, and then move your face slowly from side to side. His eyes should follow your face. As long as he keeps eye contact and appears calm, you can speak softly to him.
As he becomes more alert inside his isolette, you may want to give him a picture to look at when you are not there. Choose a picture of yourself or your family, a picture of a baby, or a simple black and white picture. Use a small checkerboard of 2 white and 2 black squares, a small bull’s eye, or 4 stripes.

Before you leave the picture, present it to the baby to be sure it does not overstimulate or stress him.

Some babies respond well to sounds, including music and voices. Before bringing a tape recorder to your baby’s bedside, check with his nurse. Some tape recorders are too loud for the NICU and baby. Tape your voice or soft, soothing music. Classical music tends to be the most soothing, but is also sometimes arousing to babies. Rock music should not be used at any time.

If your baby starts to become drowsy during feedings, you may want to try some of these techniques:

- Use gentle pressure on the baby’s palm
- Lay the baby flat in your lap and then raise him to a sitting position 2-3 times
- Gently stroke around the mouth and cheeks with your finger or with a wet cloth

**Conclusion**

Learn to understand your baby’s behavior, so you will know when he is stressed. When he is alert you can help him learn things about the world. By learning his signals and cues, you will also benefit. You will not feel as frustrated when you understand why your baby may need to just hold your finger, instead of being held and talked to.

The staff in the NICU is here to help you meet your family’s and baby’s short and long term needs. Many are involved in the care of your baby, but you may only meet a few of them. Please feel free to ask any question at any time. You may want to arrange a time to speak separately with your baby’s doctor or other health care professionals. Occupational or physical therapists are available to answer questions about your baby ‘s development.

If you would like more written information, please call the Library for Health Information at (614)293-3707. You can also make the request by e-mail: health-info@osu.edu.

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- Upon request all patient education handouts are available in other formats for people with special hearing, vision and language needs, call (614) 293-3191.