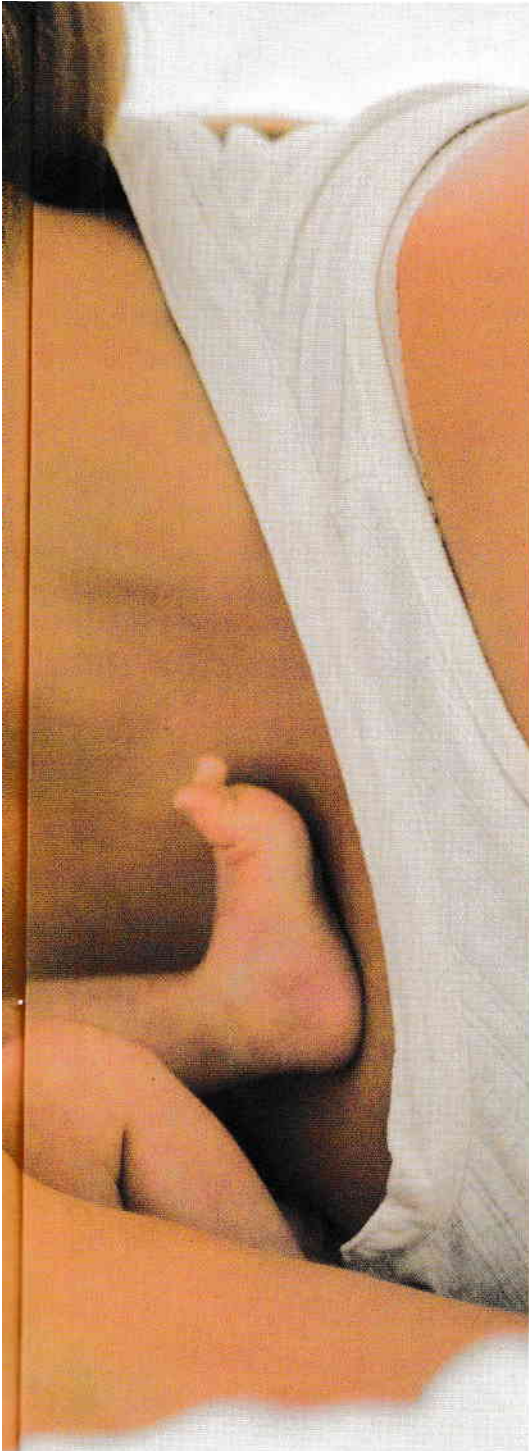




THE **1th** **4th** TRIMES

The first three months are a time for helping bub wide world. **MEGAN BLANDFORD** looks at how



Settling into the world is a big task for your little baby, and she's going to need your help. Many say that considering the first three months of your little one's life as the 'fourth trimester' can help you see this period as an extension of life in utero. And this might be just the thing to better understand the transition your baby is making, and also allow you and your partner to adjust to life as new parents. "This mindset helps parents empathise with their baby, to consider what her experience is," says Jane Barry, a midwife and child health nurse.

The first three months are a time of bonding, learning, experimentation to find what works for your family, and love. But don't despair if it doesn't all fall into place immediately. "Falling in love takes time," says Jane. "Some women are overcome with incredible love when their baby is born, but lots aren't. Be reassured that parents are designed to fall in love with their baby and babies are designed to help their parents fall in love with them." And before you know it, you and your little one will be navigating life together. Here's how to get started.

SKIN TO SKIN

Spending as much time as possible in physical contact with each other is one of the best ways you can reassure your newborn. "Mum and baby get to exchange sensory information while stimulating the release of hormones in each other," explains Kristin Beckedahl, a postnatal doula from BodyWise BirthWise. "Skin-to-skin contact stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, which elicits feelings and behaviours in mum to help keep her baby safe, nourished and calm." And being physically close with your baby not only helps create and strengthen this important bond, it's also beneficial for bub's health. "Skin-to-skin contact immediately after birth allows the baby to be colonised by the same bacteria as her mother," says Kristin. "This, plus breastfeeding, are thought to be important in the development of the immune system and the prevention of allergic diseases."

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Kristin suggests sharing baths with your baby, massaging her and giving her topless cuddles as good ways to keep in touch with each other.

As well as touching, don't underestimate the power of your other senses in this bonding process, too. "Parents absorb their baby through every sense," says Jane, including that intoxicating smell of a newborn. "There's nothing on this earth like the smell of your own baby's breath – it's so pure," she adds.

FOLLOW BUB'S LEAD

Although parenting is the most basic of instincts, it involves plenty of learning along the way, and your best teacher comes in perhaps the least likely of places: right in your arms. Letting your baby lead you is a wonderful way to give her exactly what she needs to settle into the world. During

this fourth trimester period, you'll get to know your little one and how she behaves when she's hungry, tired or uncomfortable, which will help you fulfil her needs. Kristin says the signs from your baby can be subtle, so these early days are about slowing down to spend time getting to know her. "It is important to have the time

to just hang out with your baby, learn what is normal and what is not, what works and what doesn't," she advises.

Watch for her cues and give yourself the space to learn how she wants you to respond to her. And, while this can be difficult at times as you go through this learning process, keep in mind that this transition stage will pass. "Babies cry and, whatever the cause, most babies tend to become calmer, more predictable and more settled around three months," Jane says.

DO AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE

"Babies respond best to situations of loving, calmness and gentleness," says Jane, and one way to achieve this calmness is to keep the pace of the outside world at bay. Kristin says that although everyone in your life wants to >

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SAFETY FOR NEWBORNS

Safety comes above all else and Barbara Minuzzo, senior project coordinator at The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne Safety Centre, shares these tips for new parents:

- ★ Only use car restraints and nursery furniture that meet current Australian standards.
- ★ Less is more in a sleeping environment: don't have cot bumpers, excess blankets, soft toys or pillows in with your baby.
- ★ Always sleep your baby on her back.
- ★ Changing bub on a blanket on the floor is a good idea, but if you do use a change table make sure you have everything within reach and keep a hand on your baby at all times to prevent falls.
- ★ Think about what safety features you have in your house and what you could further implement, such as smoke detectors and heater guards.
- ★ Keep hot drinks well away from your little one, and don't let others sip their cuppa while holding your precious bundle.
- ★ Your baby will be putting things in her mouth, so make sure toys are good quality and don't have small parts.
- ★ Invest in a first aid course – and ask other carers and grandparents to do the same – so you know what to do if an accident happens.
- ★ Keep your emergency numbers by the phone.
- ★ Ask for help, as injuries can happen when you're tired, distracted or unwell.
- ★ Look up the Home Safety Checklist on The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne website (www.rch.org.au/safetycentre), and SIDS and Kids also has safe sleeping guidelines (www.sidsandkids.org).

meet the new arrival, the wellbeing of baby and parents needs to come first. "Being social, especially in those first few days and weeks, can be exhausting for a new mum. Babies are also easily overstimulated with noise, light and different smells," she says. Ask visitors to wait until you're ready, or schedule them so

visits aren't too hectic. Leaving the house as little as possible (unless you're itching to get out!) is a good way to create calmness, too, so you might like to ask for help in doing shopping and other chores so you can focus on yourself and your baby. "Go gently and go slowly," advises Kristin. "The priority in the early times is to do as little as possible outside of finding your feet as a new mother."

It's worth thinking about the bigger picture during these early days, too, and considering how taking this gentle fourth trimester approach can help you retain some energy for the months and years to come. "Parenting isn't a sprint, it's a marathon," says Jane. This is just the beginning of your parenting experience and it's a time to look after yourself and your new family member.

MIMIC THE WOMB

To help bub adjust to her new environment you can do a few things to remind her she's in safe, familiar hands. "Keeping your baby close helps mimic the womb-world she has known," says Kristin, who says that babywearing is helpful and can involve both

parents. "Babies also respond well to movement, like rocking, swaying, car or pram rides, or even bouncing gently on a fitball," she says. Swaddling can also help your little one feel secure. "Swaddling helps to contain the startle reflex, it soothes her and promotes sleep," says Jane. White noise in the form of an untuned radio or white-noise track can also be helpful. Water, in the form of a deep, warm bath, is also a perfect way to calm your baby, and Kristin describes this as an effective and quick way to influence your newborn's mood. "Babies often melt into the water as though returning to the womb," she says. ★

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