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Lessons from a first-time grandparent

Last week my wife and I were blessed with our first grandchild, a healthy 6 pound 14 oz baby girl. Despite the fact that we are the proud parents of a handsome son and two beautiful daughters, we are certain our granddaughter is the most gorgeous baby ever born. It must be true; her other set of grandparents said the same thing. We've also quickly learned that it is much easier being a grandparent than parent, and that parents, in even the best of circumstances, easily become exhausted, overwhelmed, and insecure.

Is the baby getting enough milk at the breast? Has she lost too much weight? Is she too yellow? If he is all right, why is he crying so much? Young parents welcoming their first child have often had limited prior child-care experience and few available opportunities for lessons on newborn parenting.

There is a lot to learn, even when all is normal and well. Here are some things to know:

All babies lose weight during the first few days of life. For some infants, the weight loss may approach 10 percent; for example, a loss of 12 ounces in a 7 ½-pound baby. This weight loss occurs with both breast and bottle-fed infants. If significant weight loss occurs in a drowsy infant who sleeps through feedings, however, or in a baby who wets his diapers only two to three times a day, a notify a pediatrician. Under normal circumstances, infants regain their birth weight by a 1 week old, and begin to gain an ounce a day during the next few months, or about 2 pounds per month.

Breast-feeding the first baby is typically a challenge initially, but proves extremely rewarding and satisfying for both mother and child by the second week of life. In the beginning, a new mother and newborn are both inexperienced. Although nursing is a natural activity, both need time and practice before the infant learns to successfully latch on to the breast and develop a mom-baby partnership.

Prior to producing milk, the new mom produces colostrum, which is rich in protective antibodies. An ample milk supply develops at three to four days following delivery and is often accompanied by significant breast swelling and discomfort. Remaining committed to breast-feeding during those first few days can be stressful, and insecurity about adequacy of supply can be anxiety provoking. However, switching from breast to bottle can confuse the baby, because these are two different activities. Parents should talk with their pediatrician, who can assist in recommending a breast-feeding specialist, if necessary.

Most newborns are also noticeably yellow by the third or fourth day of life. For most infants, this is a normal condition as the baby adjusts to life on his own. In some cases, however, yellow skin tone can indicate a serious problem if the color change deepens or lasts more than a few days. These conditions are all treatable, so sharing concerns with a pediatrician is important.

All parents know that infants cry a lot. Infant sleep-wake periods vary greatly. While one set of tired parents have an infant that sleeps 14 hours a day, another feels they have won the lottery because their baby sleeps 20 hours a day. Fussiness and crying does not always indicate pain or hunger. They are normal infant activity. Over time, the crying becomes more meaningful, and parents learn the meaning of particular cries. However, some babies cry much more than others. Crying times also vary from child to child, and are more significant in babies awake for increased hours in a day. Crying times increase to three hours a day for the average infant, with a peak reached at about three to four months of age.

Watching our kids with their first child brought back many memories for my wife and me, including the insecurities we felt with our new and overwhelming unfamiliar responsibilities. When confronted with the newness of parenting, our son, who is also a fully trained pediatrician remarked, "I think being a dad will make me a better pediatrician."

Parenting is life's hardest and most important job. Parents receive little training, lack adequate support, and, in many cases have unrealistic expectations. It is normal to be tired, anxious, and insecure as a new parent. If tension remains high, or parenting feels overwhelming, parents must share their feelings with family, friends, or pediatricians. For many parents, however, when that baby boy or girl at 3 to 4 months old returns a parent's smile much of the past stress and worry is likely to melt away.

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