

3.2. Postnatal care: forming a relationship for supporting nurturing care

From the moment of birth, caregivers form a relationship that affects the care of the child during the vulnerable postnatal period and throughout childhood. Infants depend on their caregivers to respond on demand to their hunger, keep them close and warm, and recognize and address any discomfort. More specialized services for small and at-risk newborns are beginning to promote the participation of mothers in this early care, in partnership with staff who are responsible for intensive medical interventions.

Giving newborns breast milk contributes to their survival, and breastfeeding has important benefits for both mothers and babies. It can be a moment to bond and help mothers recognize how their infant reaches out to them and how they can respond. Difficulties in early breastfeeding are barriers to the mother bonding well with the child and forming a satisfying relationship. Infants with disabilities, even when not yet recognized, may have difficulties expressing their hunger and feeding. Effective breastfeeding counselling is critical for preventing a mother from rejecting a child while gaining the capacity and confidence to respond to meet the child's nutritional and other needs.

Rapid learning occurs in the first few weeks. Caregivers are usually delighted to see that their child can see and hear from birth and react to them. They help their children learn by talking and playing with them. Asking caregivers to do a simple task, such as massaging the newborn and making cooing sounds, demonstrates what play looks like with a young infant. Seeing the infant stretch and react happily during this practice activity encourages caregivers to interact frequently with the child at home (see **Box 6**).

BOX 6. A MOTHER AND FATHER ARE RESPONSIVE TO THEIR SMALL NEWBORN

Mothers and fathers learn to be sensitive to their newborn by looking closely into the baby's eyes and talking. Even this small, premature baby gives signs of reaching out to her parents for an affectionate response.

Sensitive parents help their newborn develop fully, physically and intellectually, by recognizing and responding to the infant's signs of hunger, discomfort and need for affection.



Photo credit: American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon/Lama Charafeddine



If the infant does not look at a caregiver, it may be because the caregiver does not know how to be responsive. Responding to the child engages the child and develops attachment to the caregiver. The provider may need time to help the caregiver respond when the child reaches out. These activities might reveal concerns that an infant does not appear to hear or see the caregiver. Using a prepared list of hospital and local services, the provider can refer the child for early screening if necessary.

Given that maternal depression is common during this period, the provider should ask the mother how she feels about having the baby and what her concerns are. This is a time when many mothers are particularly stressed, have difficulty sleeping or are overwhelmed by their responsibilities in the home. Especially if the child is weak or has a disability, mothers may fear that they will hurt the child. They may be concerned about not being able to stop the child crying, feed or sleep well. These difficulties disrupt others and may create tension in the household. A provider can help the mother find solutions to her concerns and introduce ways to calm the child, overcome feeding difficulties and request the help she needs from her family.

Observing that a mother has little joy in responding to her baby may indicate a need for specialized counselling services. A provider should review the conditions that affect the safety of the young child and mother by looking for any signs of physical or psychological abuse.

Table 3.2 gives suggestions for what providers can do to strengthen caregiver practices and support caregiver well-being during postnatal visits.



Table 3.2. Supporting caregivers during postnatal visits

COMPONENT OF NURTURING CARE	CAREGIVER PRACTICES	EXAMPLES OF WHAT SERVICE PROVIDERS CAN DO
<p>Responsive caregiving</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Look closely at your child. <input type="checkbox"/> Be aware of your child's signals (e.g. hunger, discomfort, attempts to communicate, joy and need for attention). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Counsel During an observation of breastfeeding, coach the mother – Look into your baby's eyes. Your baby is so beautiful. Talk softly to your baby. Sing to your baby. Touch your baby's fingers. See how your baby is wanting to reach for you and grab your finger. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Will both mother and father attend the early postnatal visits together, if possible? <input type="checkbox"/> Counsel Coach the father on how to hold the baby – Support your baby's head and look closely into your baby's eyes. What can you say to your child? See how your baby is wanting to reach for you. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss How does your baby tell you that she is hungry, even before crying? Discuss feeding on demand. Recognize the signs that the baby is hungry and respond by breastfeeding. <input type="checkbox"/> Counsel With a game, help the father and mother be more responsive to their baby - Look closely at your baby. Whatever sound or movement your baby makes, copy it. Get a conversation going by copying the baby's sounds and gestures. This helps you and your baby respond to each other. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss Healthy babies see and hear from birth. Show me how you know your baby can see and hear. Show me how you could help your baby learn to smile. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask How well is your baby sleeping? What do you do when your baby does not sleep well? <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss Leaving your baby to cry is not a good way to calm the baby. Calm yourself first. Then hold your baby close with a firm hand on his back. What other strategies could you try to calm yourself and your baby?
<p>Opportunities for early learning</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Talk with your child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask How do you talk with your baby? What do you talk about? How does your baby respond to your voice? During your daily household tasks, when can you talk to your baby? <input type="checkbox"/> Ask How does the baby's father or other family member talk to the baby? <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss Your baby is learning language long before being able to speak. Your baby can show you she understands even if she is not able to respond verbally. What non-verbal cues have you observed that show understanding or an intent to communicate something?


Table 3.2. Continued

COMPONENT OF NURTURING CARE	CAREGIVER PRACTICES	EXAMPLES OF WHAT SERVICE PROVIDERS CAN DO
<p>Opportunities for early learning</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Play with your child. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Follow your child’s lead and assist the child’s interest in exploration and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask How do you play with your baby? <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss Even a very young baby is learning by playing with you –reaching, tugging your fingers, making faces at you. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss What do you have at home that is safe and clean for play? <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss If the baby is born too soon, underweight, or otherwise at-risk – Frequently playing with your baby is especially helpful. It stimulates the brain and body to develop during this important time of rapid growth. Your baby should be active at least 30 minutes each day, spread out, not all at once. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss Gently massage your baby. See how she responds. <input type="checkbox"/> Coach the mother and father Slowly move a colourful object back and forth in front of the baby’s eyes. When the child reaches for it, give the child the object to touch and wrap his fingers around.
<p>Safety and security</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Build your child’s trust through a warm, responsive presence – even in difficult environments. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make a safe home environment for exploration and increasing independence. <input type="checkbox"/> Protect your child from harmful substances. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss When you are tense, your baby is tense. When you relax, your baby relaxes with you. Your baby looks to you for safety and protection and will interpret the world through your reactions to it. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss Your baby knows you care. When your baby is hungry, you feed her. When your baby fusses, you pick him up and comfort him. Your baby depends on you to be there in a protective circle, even when conditions around you are difficult. Hold your baby close to you. These actions help your baby to feel safe and secure. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Are you sometimes afraid that others in your home might hurt you or your baby? Is there anyone you feel you could talk with about your concerns? <input type="checkbox"/> Refer Follow the protocol if there are signs of abuse. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Do you or anyone else smoke in your home? How can you protect your baby from second-hand smoke?

Table 3.2. Continued

SUPPORTING CAREGIVER WELL-BEING

EXAMPLES OF WHAT SERVICE PROVIDERS CAN DO

<p>Supporting caregiver well-being</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Build their capacity to care for themselves. □ Problem-solve and organize support from family members. □ Follow the protocol if there are mental health concerns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Ask Do you still have any pain or discomfort after the birth? If so, let's take care of it. □ Ask How do you feel about having this baby? What is difficult for you? □ Ask What do you do to relax? □ Ask How are you sleeping? I know you must be exhausted. What help do you need to get more sleep? How can your family take on additional childcare and other household tasks? □ Discuss Where can you go for help if you need it? Do you have a friend, a neighbour, an older family member or a religious leader you could talk with? □ Refer If there are mental health or safety concerns, refer the mother and baby to specialized services.
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