



**NURTURING CARE**  
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

# Nurturing care for every newborn



## What is nurturing care?

What happens during early childhood (pregnancy to age 8) lays the foundation for a lifetime. We have made great strides in improving child survival, but we also need to create the conditions to help children thrive as they grow and develop. This requires providing children with nurturing care, especially in the earliest years (pregnancy to age 3).

Nurturing care comprises five interrelated and indivisible components: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. Nurturing care protects children from the worst effects of adversity and produces lifelong and intergenerational benefits for health, productivity and social cohesion.

Nurturing care happens when we maximize every interaction with a child. Every moment, small or large, structured or unstructured, is an opportunity to ensure children are healthy, receive nutritious food, are safe and learning about themselves, others and their world. What we do matters, but how we do it matters more.

**When cared for in a nurturing environment, babies not only survive, they are also helped to thrive. However, too many infants are deprived of their right to receive nurturing care, including when they require inpatient hospital care.**

Every year an estimated 140 million babies are born, and among these about 30 million need inpatient hospital care with 8 – 10 million requiring neonatal intensive care (1). Since 1990, global newborn mortality has more than halved, but in 2019 an estimated 2.4 million newborns still died in the first month after birth (2). Babies who are born prematurely, have low

birth weight or experience birth complications are at the greatest risk, not only of death but also of lifelong disability. Progress in reducing newborn mortality will be compromised unless investments are also made in nurturing care.

Birth is the critical transition for every newborn from being nurtured in the womb to being cared for in the outside world. Essential newborn care - with immediate skin-to-skin contact, warmth, hygiene, early initiation of exclusive breastfeeding and zero separation of caregiver and newborn - is designed to make this transition as smooth as possible and provide the infant with a nurturing environment in the first minutes and hours after birth, needed for the brain and body to grow and develop (3).

This Thematic Brief summarizes why nurturing care is essential for every newborn. It outlines the five components of nurturing care and contains examples of practical actions to create and strengthen nurturing environments for newborns, including those who are born too soon, small or sick.

The first month of life is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for children to begin the journey of unlocking their full potential. Policy-makers, health care managers, health care providers and parents can lead the transformation that is needed for every newborn to make the best start in life. In this Brief, six case studies illustrate what can be done to create a nurturing environment and enable caregivers to provide nurturing care for their newborns, starting in the health facility and continuing at home.

## The importance of nurturing care for newborns to survive and thrive

**Neurodevelopment starts in pregnancy and rapidly accelerates after birth. By the end of 28 weeks of gestation the growing fetus can hear, and from birth babies can recognize their mother's voice.**

Neural connections are formed in the brain at an astounding speed in the early days and weeks after birth, creating the pathways for lifelong sensory functions such as hearing, seeing, speaking and understanding the environment. For this to happen, a newborn's brain needs to receive appropriate stimuli from the close interaction that newborns have with their caregivers and the environment, starting immediately

## Facts and figures

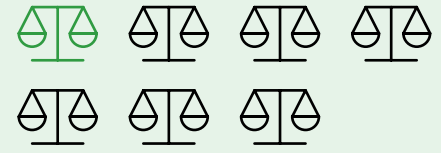
Globally, more than **80%** of births take place in a health facility with a skilled attendant (4).



One of every ten infants is born preterm (5).

Direct causes of death are prematurity, birth complications, neonatal sepsis and congenital anomalies.

An estimated **2.4 million** newborns die every year, mostly from preventable causes (2).



One of every seven infants is born with a low birth weight (6).

Low birth weight contributes to 60 – 80% of all newborn deaths (7).

after birth. When infants experience loving care from their parents and other caregivers, they have the best chance to survive and thrive, whether they are in a health facility or at home. But when newborns are deprived of such care, for example through separation from their caregivers or exposure to stress or pain, they become more vulnerable, with increased risk of dying or disability, including learning, visual and hearing problems. Therefore, nurturing care is vital for every newborn (1).

During pregnancy, nurturing care is supported by a minimum of eight antenatal contacts with health professionals. Each contact provides an opportunity for counselling the woman and her family regarding healthy diet, prevention of tobacco and substance abuse, birth planning and breastfeeding promotion, as well as providing mental health support. Optimal antenatal care includes iron and folate supplementation, early ultrasound, where available, for gestational age assessment and early identification and management of risk factors for preterm birth including infections (8).

High quality care during childbirth positions the mother to provide nurturing care to her newborn. It involves the presence of a birth companion of her choice, and the avoidance of unnecessary procedures, including caesarian section. Evidence shows that a traumatic birth experience can affect a mother's ability to bond with her baby and increase the risk of perinatal depression. Ensuring a positive birthing experience for every pregnant woman is a key aspect of supporting nurturing care, and is often best achieved through midwife-led care (8).



Photo credit: © USAID/Amy Cotter

## In the first month of life, all five components of nurturing care need to be supported for every newborn.

Good health involves preventing and managing illness, including provision of evidence-based high quality care for sick or small newborns.

Adequate nutrition means optimizing exclusive breastfeeding or breast-milk feeding, including for very small and sick babies.

Safety and security means warmth, practising good hygiene, minimizing stress, and enabling the primary caregiver, most commonly the mother, to be with the infant in a quiet environment.

Early learning involves stimulating the baby's brain gently, through touch, voice or simply close contact.

Responsive caregiving means being aware of the newborn's signals, which can indicate readiness for a feed, pain or stress, and responding to them appropriately.



## What are the nurturing care components?

### GOOD HEALTH



Refers to health and well-being of children and their caregivers. Why both? We know that the physical and mental health of caregivers can affect their ability to care for the child.

### ADEQUATE NUTRITION



Refers to maternal and child nutrition. Why both? We know that the nutritional status of the mother during pregnancy affects her health and well-being and that of her unborn child. After birth, the mother's nutritional status affects her ability to provide adequate care to her young child.

### SAFETY AND SECURITY



Refers to safe and secure environments for children and their families. Includes physical dangers, emotional stress, environmental risks (e.g. pollution), and access to food and water.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY LEARNING



Refers to any opportunity for the infant or child to interact with a person, place, or object in their environment. Recognizes that every interaction (positive or negative) or absence of an interaction is contributing to the child's brain development and laying the foundation for later learning.

### RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING



Refers to the ability of the caregiver to notice, understand, and respond to their child's signals in a timely and appropriate manner. Considered the foundational component because responsive caregivers are better able to support the other four components.

## Creating a nurturing environment for all newborns

When health care providers partner with families to provide nurturing care, more newborns will survive and receive better care in the health facility and at home to ensure they can thrive.

A nurturing environment is enabled when maternal and newborn care services are organized around core principles of dignity and respect, information sharing, participation and collaboration.

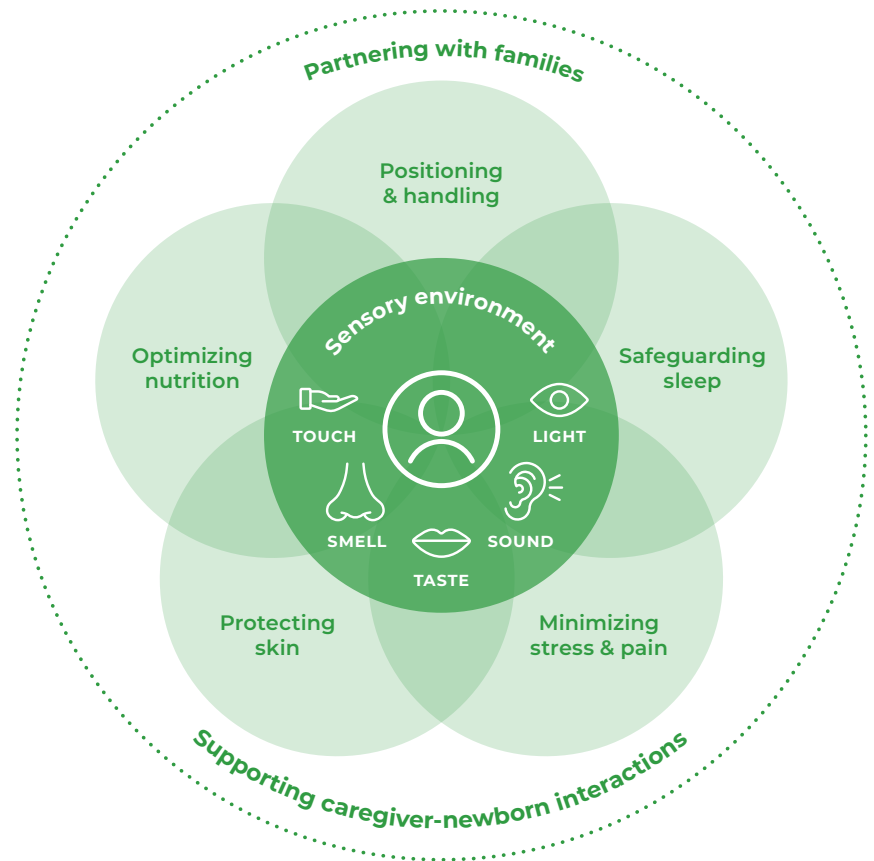
One approach is *infant- and family-centred developmental care* (IFCDC), which creates a nurturing environment to respond to each baby's needs and minimizes harm (Figure 1). IFCDC reduces stress for the newborn and the parents, increases bonding, benefits the child's feeding and growth, supports the child's neurodevelopment, helps to prevent disabilities, and facilitates early discharge from inpatient care.

Developmentally supportive elements of newborn care are optimizing nutrition, positioning and handling, safeguarding sleep, minimizing stress and pain and protecting the skin (9). This approach creates a sensory environment to respond to each infant's needs and minimize harm, and is especially important for small or sick babies who need inpatient care.

### Provide early essential newborn care

Newborn care begins in the first seconds, minutes and hours after birth and encompasses thermal care, immediate skin-to-skin contact with the mother, keeping mother and baby together with zero separation even after a caesarean birth, identification of small or sick newborns for special care, early initiation of exclusive breastfeeding or breast-milk feeding, hygiene and handwashing, dry cord care, delayed bathing, and immunization.

Figure 1. Components of infant- and family-centred developmental care (9)



Evidence shows that adherence to recommended essential newborn care practices substantially reduces newborn mortality risks and supports neurodevelopment (10).

### Engage parents as partners

Full participation of the family in newborn care begins immediately after birth with skin-to-skin contact of mother and baby for at least one hour after both vaginal and caesarean births. This contact establishes a physical and emotional environment for mother and baby that promotes physiological stability and encourages bonding. During this precious time, many babies will start searching for their mother's milk, and early breastfeeding is initiated. Fathers should not be forgotten as equal parents and, with other family members, should receive attention and guidance on how to engage in the care of their infant.

### Implement the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding

The Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative (11) and the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding support a nurturing environment in maternity facilities and equip caregivers with the confidence and skills to provide nurturing care for their newborn.

### Promote exclusive breastfeeding

The importance of early initiation of exclusive breastfeeding for a newborn's health and development cannot be overestimated. Breast milk contains all the nutrients needed in the first 6 months of life for most babies, including those who are small or sick and may require assisted feeding, including cup and nasogastric feeding. Breastfeeding also protects against common childhood illnesses, and reduces the risk of overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence. Yet, current estimates are that only 42% of babies are exclusively breastfed in the first 6 months of life (4). When small or sick babies require supplementary feeding the use of donor human milk from safe and affordable milk-banking facilities is recommended; these may need to be set up.