

**Ep #78: Your Newborn Is an Alien
(And Other Delightful Truths No One Told You)**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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This episode is for our expecting parents, our parents-to-be, our expecting-to-be expecting parents. We're going to talk all about what a brand-new newborn baby is actually like, and how you can make those first few weeks and months really great for both you and them. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello, and welcome back to *Parenthood Prep*, the podcast that prepares you for parenthood. Today, I want to talk about newborn babies. I know I've mentioned them a lot; I've talked about them some. I know a lot of my listeners are expecting parents, or maybe not even expecting to be expecting.

So, I would love to get you ready for the first months, the first weeks, days, the first minutes with your baby. Because I think, as a society we are really bad at preparing people for what a newborn baby is actually like. A long time ago, and certainly in a lot of other cultures where people live closer to their families and have a lot of community around them, you would be around a lot of newborns, whether it was your younger siblings, or your nieces and nephews, or your neighbors, or whatever. You would just be seeing these babies all the time.

But honestly, in our society today, we just really aren't exposed to that. If we're ever around a newborn, it might be our younger siblings. But we have one or two... Maybe we don't remember what it was like when we were four years old, 30 years ago. And now we're having a baby.

Most of the babies that you're familiar with are probably three months, four months plus. A colleague of mine said this years ago, and it is so absolutely true and absolutely encapsulates how a lot of new parents feel.

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People expect to be giving birth to a six-month-old, a baby that's going to open their eyes big, and coo and gurgle at you. Still a baby that you hold in your arms, but they can hold up their head. They look like a small person. They look like a baby doll. They do things. They smile. They laugh. They make sounds. They can use their hands. They can suck their thumb.

If you've never been around a newborn, this is what you think of when you think of a baby. And listen, there's nothing wrong with that because that is what a baby is for a lot of its early life. Also, it's probably the only thing you've ever seen. On television, it's actually kind of hysterical whenever there's a birth in a TV show or a movie. And generally, it's worse the lower budget the show is.

They're not going to get a brand-new baby that's actually hours or days old to play the newborn in this TV show. They're going to get a baby that's a little bit older. Interesting little, fun fact, actually. It's not because parents don't want to put their brand-new, days-old babies into movies and TV shows. It's because you have to have a work permit to act. And when you are a brand-new newborn baby, it takes a little bit of time to get that work permit. So, that's a fun little factoid about capitalism.

Anyway, you have probably seen babies on TV being born, and the baby's big and fat, eyes open looking up at the parents, making eye contact, going, "ooh, ooh, ooh," or whatever. One of my guilty pleasures is trashy Christmas movies or holiday movies, because there's also some decent Hanukkah ones.

And in the *Christmas Prince*, which I feel like is the perfect exemplar of the genre, there's one where she has a baby. And this baby that she gives birth to is four months old, at least. And it's just so funny when you're someone who's around newborn babies all the time to see these babies and be like, "That is nothing like what is going to come out of your body on the day of your baby's birth."

What is going to come out of your body on the day of your baby's birth? Well, it looks like an alien, or possibly a very old man. They're very wrinkled and red. They're covered in goo, which is called vernix, from being inside your body.

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They usually are all scrunched up. Their bodies are all scrunched up because they were just inside your belly or someone's belly for nine months.

They don't really have a lot of control over their limbs. In fact, their limbs are actually really scrawny, kind of like little raw chicken wings. Their legs are usually really skinny too.

When we met our friend's baby almost two years ago now, it was the first time my partner, Alex, had met a baby this young. He was like three weeks old at this point, he wasn't even this at the brand-new-just-born stage. And I think I might've told this story before, but it's so funny. The next day he said to me, "I couldn't get over how useless his limbs were. He was doing nothing with any purpose or meaning."

Because really, what we're focused on when we are growing inside a uterus is brain development and major organ development. And your major organs are in your torso, so a newborn baby is basically a head and a torso with little scrawny chicken wings and scrawny chicken legs that it really needs to grow into over the next few weeks, months, and even years.

If you look at the head proportion of a three-year-old compared to an adult or even a 10-year-old, it's just wildly different. Our heads only grow in size a certain percentage, and then our bodies grow in size, massive, massive percentage. Imagine right now, take your arm and reach it up over your head and see how far around your head you can reach.

I'm doing it. I'm getting about to below my opposite ear, like basically my jaw on the opposite side of my head. If you look at a baby or a two-year-old or a three-year-old, their arm barely goes up to the top of their head. It's crazy. So, their proportions are all different. They're not just smaller adults. They're totally differently proportioned, and their arms and legs are really scrawny and really useless.

Like I said, they have been cooped up inside someone's body for nine months, more or less, and they need time to figure out how to control their muscles, and

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how to move those muscles, and how to work their nervous system, and how to respond to these electrical impulses and things like that.

They kind of look like a bug with just this beetle kind of body and these little arms and legs. Especially if they're swaddled up or they're just all scrunched up.

People always bring these cute little outfits to the hospital to dress them up in. And either the outfit is huge on them, or you put it on and it's like they're all scrunched up inside of it. I mean, do that. But really, for the first few weeks, first few months, they're going to be wearing basically a t-shirt and a blanket. Certainly, for the first two weeks.

Beyond that, you can get them into footed sleepers, but they aren't really even going to look cute in a little outfit until they get some fat in those arms and legs. So, you might as well just keep it simple in the beginning. Get some really beautiful swaddle blankets. Get some cute things to put on their head, like hats and headbands and things like that. Don't bother with cute outfits for tiny newborns because they just look weird in them.

That is a newborn, they're cute enough. They're actually not that cute. Of course, it's your baby, so you're going to love it and you're going to think it's the most beautiful thing. But I have had multiple parents say to me that looking back at pictures of their kids when they were first born...

Now that they're six months old, they actually are adorable. They're chubby and just delicious, and they make eye contact and just everything about them is great. They look super cute in outfits...

But they look back at those newborn pictures and they're like, "I thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. But now, looking back, I'm like, 'What is this alien that is nowhere near as cute as this baby that I have now?'"

So, don't be surprised when the thing that comes out of you, or your partner not being surprised when the thing that comes out, is just pretty unpleasant looking and often screaming, red faced. Of course, that's great news. It means their

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lungs are working. Sometimes they come out really calm and they just look at you, and you have this beautiful moment of eye contact, and that's fantastic.

They're very physically connected to your body, literally through the umbilical cord. But also, because they just want to be next to someone, close to someone, feeling your heartbeat, feeling your skin, feeling your warmth, feeling your breathing. That's how they regulate themselves. So, you want to hold them on your body as much as possible, skin to skin.

We talk about it all the time and it gets a lot of lip service, but I think it's actually really great to do. Take your shirt off, put the baby on your chest, wrap a blanket around the two of you so that you can be warm and cozy and just do whatever; watch TV like that, scroll on your phone, have company over. Just doing skin to skin, you will see how much calmer they are.

There's a reason they call the first three months of a baby's life the fourth trimester. Because of course during pregnancy there's three trimesters, three separate periods, like a hockey game, where different developmental stages happen and different things happen.

A fun anthropology fact is that human babies are actually the most helpless newborns in the entire animal kingdom. You've seen videos of baby giraffes being born. They get up and start walking almost immediately. Even baby monkeys are clinging on to their moms.

Baby humans are just completely useless. And part of the reason for that is that we actually could gestate in the womb a lot longer, and should gestate in the womb a lot longer, but the way that our bodies have evolved to walk upright, our hips are too narrow to get babies out that are much bigger than they currently are.

So, if we were to give birth to, for example, a three-month-old, that would not work. That would not go very well, even though the baby that came out would be much more prepared for the outside world.

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When I lived in Australia, I had a lot to do with baby kangaroos. I actually worked with this couple who fostered baby kangaroos. But I also interacted a lot with mom kangaroos and stuff like that. And of course, we all know about the kangaroo pouch.

You picture a stuffed kangaroo, or Kanga from *Winnie the Pooh* or whatever, and the pouch is like a pocket. But it's not actually like that. It's actually part of their body. There's a little hole in it and the baby can come and go from the pouch.

So, what happens with a baby kangaroo is that when it's born, it's actually born into the pouch. The nipple is in there for it to nurse, and it just basically moves from the womb into the pouch and starts nursing. And as time goes on, it slowly starts to come out of the pouch more and more. It'll spend more time out of the pouch interacting with the world. It'll go back in to nurse and sleep and hang out; just a lot of this in and out.

And that's what human babies want to do also. They want to be next to your body. They want to have something in their mouth, whether it's a chest or a bottle or a pacifier or whatever, because sucking is what organizes their nervous system. It really calms them. It helps them feel like they're a little bit more in control of what's going on.

So, when you put your brand-new, newborn baby down on its back, which of course is the safest way for them to be, they feel very adrift. They are not used to being in this position. They're not used to a lot of things.

They're not used to having lights. They're not used to being cold. They just spend however long floating in this perfect temperature float tank, having all of their nutrition delivered directly into their bloodstream. And now, suddenly they have to figure out how to eat, how to digest, what to do about lights, what to do about their bug limbs that are flailing all over the place because they have no control over them, what to do about this crying, what to do about noise.

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It's actually very loud when they're inside, before they're born, but it's like white noise. It's not the television and kids, their siblings screaming, all the different car horns and all the different sounds you hear in the course of a day. So, all of this is so, so brand new. All that to say, they don't need a lot of stimulation. They are dealing with so much.

So, like I said, they're flat on their back, alone, to be safe... we want that for sleep... what can we do to make that a little more comfortable for them? A little easier? Well, typically we swaddle them. So, what is swaddling? You've probably heard of it. It's when you take a blanket or a swaddle, or some sort of something, and you wrap them up. Wrap up their body pretty tightly.

You want to get their arms really kind of pinned down, almost recreating that womb environment. Now, you don't want to be too tight around their legs because you want to give their hips and legs room to move. But just by getting those arms down and sort of recreating that womb environment, that's going to be so calming for them.

Newborn babies love being swaddled. And every parent tells me, "Oh, she hates the swaddle." And then I swaddle the baby, or one of my colleagues swaddles the baby, and the baby is calm and the baby is peaceful. I think parents just don't really understand a couple of different things.

Number one, the swaddle has to be quite tight. You want it to be tighter than you think it should be. If the swaddle is too loose, it's going to be ineffective and it's going to be unsafe because they're going to be able to break out, and they're going to be able to get it up over their face potentially and cause issues with breathing and all that stuff. So, you want it to be tight, and you want it to be down away from their face. There are tons of videos online, I'm not going to try to explain this to you on a podcast.

But if it seems like they're fighting the swaddle, people tell me, "Oh, she's fighting the swaddle," and then you take them out and they're still flailing. Because that's not them consciously saying, "I don't want to be swaddled, let me out." That's them saying, "My nervous system is firing off impulses and I don't

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know how to respond to them. So, my arms are just flailing and punching and flopping everywhere. And I'm probably going to hit myself in the face and wake myself up."

They also have a startle reflex. It's called the "Moro reflex". That makes them actually startle, and a lot of times they hit themselves in the face. So, by swaddling them, we are restricting that movement. We are recreating that womb environment.

And over the course of the first two months or three months, or whatever, we're going to slowly have times where they're spending more and more time out of the swaddle, just like a kangaroo pouch. And if you want to wear them in a wrap or a carrier, that's a very similar experience. Plus, they get to be right next to your body, which they love.

So, anything that kind of physically restricts their movement and makes them feel like they haven't been just spun out into outer space flailing their limbs everywhere, that's going to be really comforting to them.

I read a book a few years ago, and it was about this educational philosophy that I actually love called RIE. But I couldn't even get past the introduction because the author was talking about how she, as an adult, had been swaddled at a workshop and it gave her a lot of anxiety. So, she decided that because of that, babies actually feel anxiety when they're being swaddled, they don't like it, and you shouldn't do it.

There are just so many flaws in that logic. You, lady, did not just come out of a womb. Your body is used to being unrestricted. But a newborn is a totally different person from an adult, or even a child or even a six-month-old.

So, we want to recreate that womb environment as much as possible. Swaddling is a great way to do that.

Another thing that a lot of parents who think their baby doesn't like being swaddled... And I'm not saying I've never, ever in my life met a baby who didn't

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like being swaddled, but it's literally 1%. Which is way, way less than the number of babies that parents think don't like being swaddled...

The other thing is that sometimes the act of getting swaddled, they don't like that. And of course they don't. They're probably already upset, they're already overtired, they're already frustrated, and now we're going to be manipulating their bodies; which newborns hate.

They hate getting their diaper changed. They hate getting their clothes changed. They hate getting taken in and out of the car seat, just because they're not used to having their body manipulated as much as they have to after they're born. Getting swaddled is the same way.

So, a lot of the time I have to just push through a little bit. "Okay, I know you're upset about this, but when we are all wrapped up and cozy, you're going to be so much happier." And then, sure enough, we finish the swaddling process, maybe pop that pacifier in, go to a dark place with some white noise going, and the next thing you know they're asleep.

And I can lay them down because there's no difficulty with transferring them; because their arms aren't flopping all over the place. They're not hitting themselves in the face. They're just nice and cozy like a burrito.

I saw something on television a million years ago, it was some country in Eastern Europe... I don't even know what country it was... And it was a video of this maternity hospital where all these people had had their babies and they swaddled them almost like a giant bandage. So, the nurses would take the baby, wrap it up, mummify it basically, with just its face sticking out.

And then she had this cart, and she lined the babies up on the cart like little hot dogs on a grill. They were just these little baby packages. She pushed the cart around to each parent; she handed each baby to its parent. It was so cute. It was like an assembly line. It was so funny, but I was like, "I bet those babies are so happy."

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Anyway, swaddle. Swaddle. Swaddle, or wear a carrier, or just hold them on your body a lot. But if you are going to put them down, which you should for sleep, for safety, swaddling is a great way to counteract those startle reflexes, that feeling of being lost in space after being in this cozy cocoon for nine months. So, swaddling is great for that.

Another thing that helps to recreate the womb environment is white noise. Using a white noise machine, or an app on your phone, or shushing, can often really, really calm a baby, especially a newborn.

Another thing is temperature. For instance, people sometimes struggle... Their baby hates the bath. And it's always, always because the water is too cold, and they're not covering them in the water enough. Because, of course you don't want your baby to drown, of course not, but you're going to supervise them. It's okay to have the water covering their body.

Also, the water doesn't have to be room temperature. It doesn't have to be cold; you're not going to burn them. If you put the inside of your wrist in the water and it doesn't make you go, Ow! and you just feel like, "Oh, this is nice and warm. This is hot," that is a good temperature for your baby.

If you dip your wrist in, that sensitive wrist, and you're like, "Ow! That's too hot," then the water's too hot. But if you're like, "Oh, this is nice," your baby will be fine in it and your baby will be happy. Also, it's basic physics. It's a pretty small amount of water so it's going to cool down really quickly, especially when it's exposed to the air.

So, keep that bathroom warm, get a space heater if you need to, make sure that water's nice and warm. And when you get the baby out of the tub, put them right into a cozy towel and wrap them up. Make sure they feel nice and warm.

But yeah, another thing, people tell me their baby hates the bath, and then I do a bath and I get the water nice and warm and I make sure it's fully covering their body, and the next thing you know the baby loves the bath. Think about it right now. I want you to visualize what is more unpleasant than sitting in a bathtub

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that's half filled with kind of cold water and your body is wet, but it's in the air? It's miserable. Of course, they're going to hate that. So that's basically it.

Treat your newborn like a baby kangaroo and think about them spending three months being in and out of your “pouch”, which is either the swaddle or a carrier. Or just lying on your chest, or someone else's chest, and getting that skin-to-skin contact. And learning how to have a body outside of a womb, which is really your baby's number one job for the first three months of their life. They're just trying to learn how to function.

So, have a little sympathy the next time they get really frustrated about it, and think, “What can I do to help my baby adjust to life outside the womb?”

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