

Tummy time can be fun.

Tummy time. Two words that for many new parents bring on anxiety. But let's face it, while parents of infants know it's good for their developing baby, the crying and fussiness tummy time can sometimes bring out in infants makes many wish they could just skip. But don't.

For years new parents would come to me sharing stories of how tummy time was torture for them and their babies and asking if they really need to do it, and perhaps it could wait till the infant was more developed and comfortable in the position. Whether they were patients, family or friends my advice was always unwavering.

I would launch into my physical therapist mantra about how babies younger than two months can spend 1-2 minutes in tummy time, with tummy time being gradually increased as the baby's neck and back control improves.

I would highlight how tummy time helps develop head control and strengthens their baby's neck, back and trunk muscles. Not only does it allow their baby to explore and see the world from a new perspective (enhancing visual and sensory development), but provided the building blocks toward the next stages of developmental milestones. (rolling over, pushing up, crawling etc.)

I would remind them that regular doses of tummy time, however stressful, was worth it because it reduced the time that their baby spent on its back, which reduced the chance of torticollis( development of tight neck muscles in a specific direction) and plagiocephaly( flat head syndrome). Babies have soft skulls and spending long periods of time in one position, can alter the shape of a developing head.

This was all very sound advice. Then I became a mother. In the beginning, my oldest daughter, born four and half weeks early, definitely wasn't a fan of tummy time. She would get very fussy as she struggled to lift her head. It is not easy for a baby to lift their heads, as it is the heaviest part of their body (at this age) and requires lots of coordination. My youngest daughter hated tummy time even more in those early weeks. (Watching her older sister play was a great motivator.)

I could finally relate to all the previous hesitations to tummy time. My maternal instincts wanted to shield my daughters from any discomfort, but I also knew tummy time presented an excellent opportunity to interact with them as infants.

So how can you turn tummy time from a chore to an enjoyable time filled with both interaction and bonding?

First, remember that tummy time does not have to be playing flat on a mat. Any position with the baby on their belly and asking them to lift their head, is considered tummy time. By changing the angle of tummy time, you can decrease the difficulty of the activity. Here are some options I used and suggest for maximizing tummy time.

- 1- Put your baby on your chest. Place your baby tummy side down on your chest or stomach. Your baby feels safest snuggled up against you. So, it's a great place to start. Then talk, sing or make

silly faces with them. Have fun. It will start with their eyes looking up and eventually move to lifting their head.

- 2- On your knees. Lay your baby across your knees for tummy time. They will be able to look around and explore. You can also stroke their neck and back muscles. This will help to stimulate the muscles and also soothe your baby.
- 3- Over an exercise ball. Place a blanket on a small exercise ball. Then place your baby tummy side down. Hold your baby tight. You can sing to them and use toys as motivation. Make it a game.
- 4- Play on the floor. You can prop your baby on a boppy (or other breast feeding pillow) or roll a towel under their chest.

All time with your infant is precious, tummy time included, especially if you have fun with it and remember that this early interaction is setting the stage for more wonderful times to come.