

# The Imperfect Parent

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A little advice to help parents  
embrace faults and doubts



# We are all imperfect

*“Children begin by loving their parents;  
as they grow older they judge them;  
sometimes they forgive them.”*

The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde

## We are all imperfect

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Playwright and novelist, Oscar Wilde, wrote these wise words in 1890, which just goes to show that parental angst isn't new.

If you're adjusting to being a new parent, or have recently had another child, you'll know that having a baby is wonderful but it can also be confusing, and at times overwhelming.

You're not alone. Every parent worries and feels anxious from time to time. Forgive yourself and don't forget a worry shared is a worry halved. This is a time when family and friends can really help.

You may also doubt that you've done the right thing. Focus on the positives. If you're a working mum or dad driving yourself mad with guilt, remind yourself that your child has a great time at nursery, with grandparents or their childminder.

We asked Bupa health experts, who are also parents, for their advice based on their most common worries. We want to show that parental angst is normal – you should be happy being an imperfect parent! If you're doing the best you can, you can't do any more.

1.

# Accept you'll get things wrong



*“I worry about everything from the cost of having a child to whether she’ll enjoy her first day at school – and my daughter’s not even two! But it’s all so worth it.”*

Mum of one

## Accept you'll get things wrong

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If you're adjusting to being a parent, you'll know that having a baby is exhilarating and emotional but it can also be confusing.

You need time to get used to the impact of having a baby in your lives, and if you're putting pressure on yourself to be the perfect mum or dad, you're not alone.

No one gets parenting right first time, or all the time for that matter! We all make mistakes. Beating yourself up about them isn't going to help you or your baby. It may even have a detrimental effect long-term.

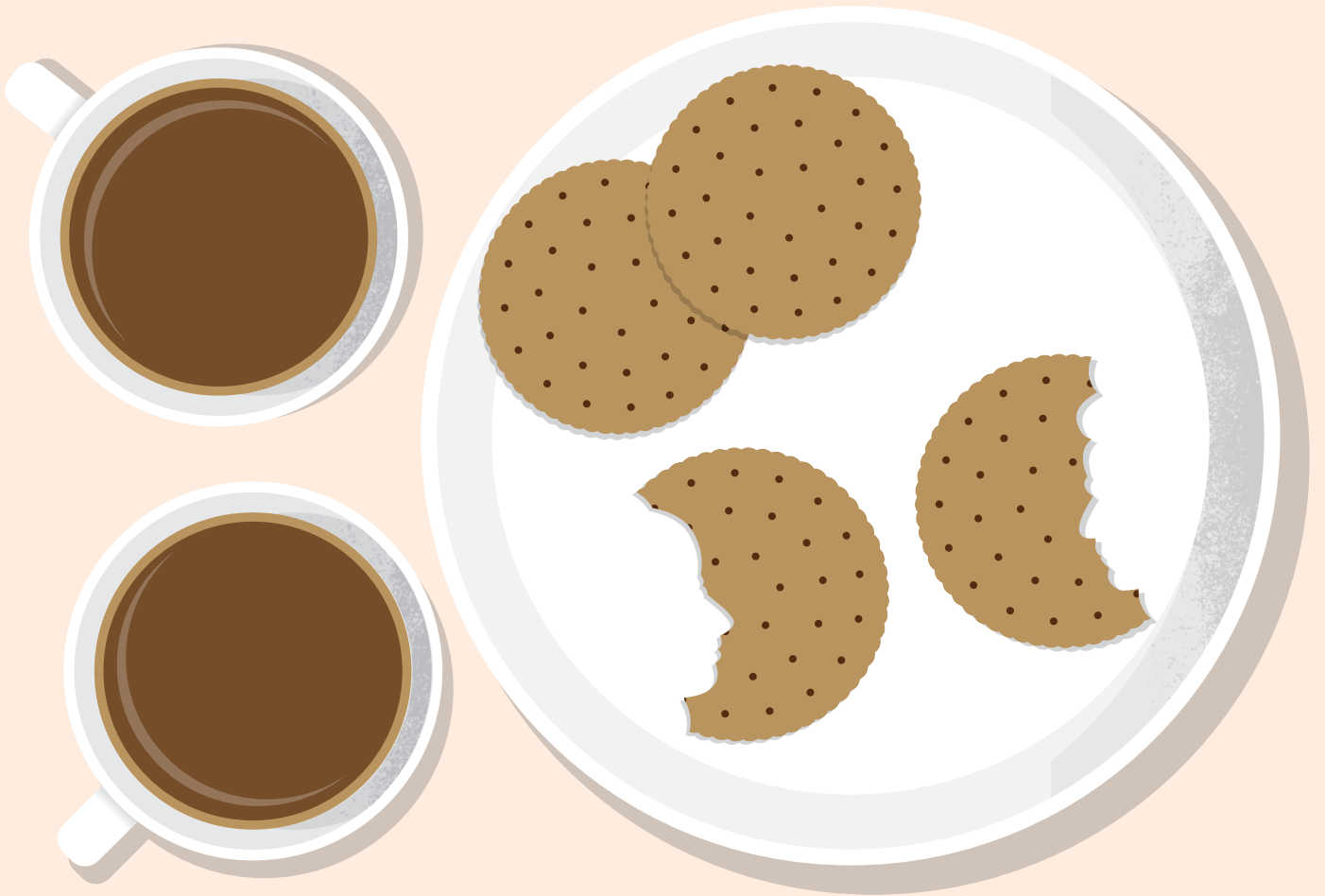
Studies have shown anxiety can be passed from parents to children. So, accept that you can't always make the right decision. There's no such thing as a perfect parent.

You and your baby will learn as you go.

**Steve Iley,**  
Medical Director, Bupa UK

# 2.

## Build a strong support network



*“Your nurse can be a fantastic source of support and knowledge. Mine cried and laughed with me and saved me when I needed saving.”*

Mum of two

## Build a strong support network

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Once you're a parent, you're part of an exclusive new club. Lots of people will offer you advice and help – even if you don't ask for it.

You don't need to listen to it all. Trust your instincts and create a network of like-minded people who you trust, particularly if relatives aren't close by or you live in a remote area.

Postnatal groups or local new parent clubs are great ways to meet new friends and reduce feelings of exclusion and loneliness. And seeing other parents facing their own challenges will help put yours into perspective.

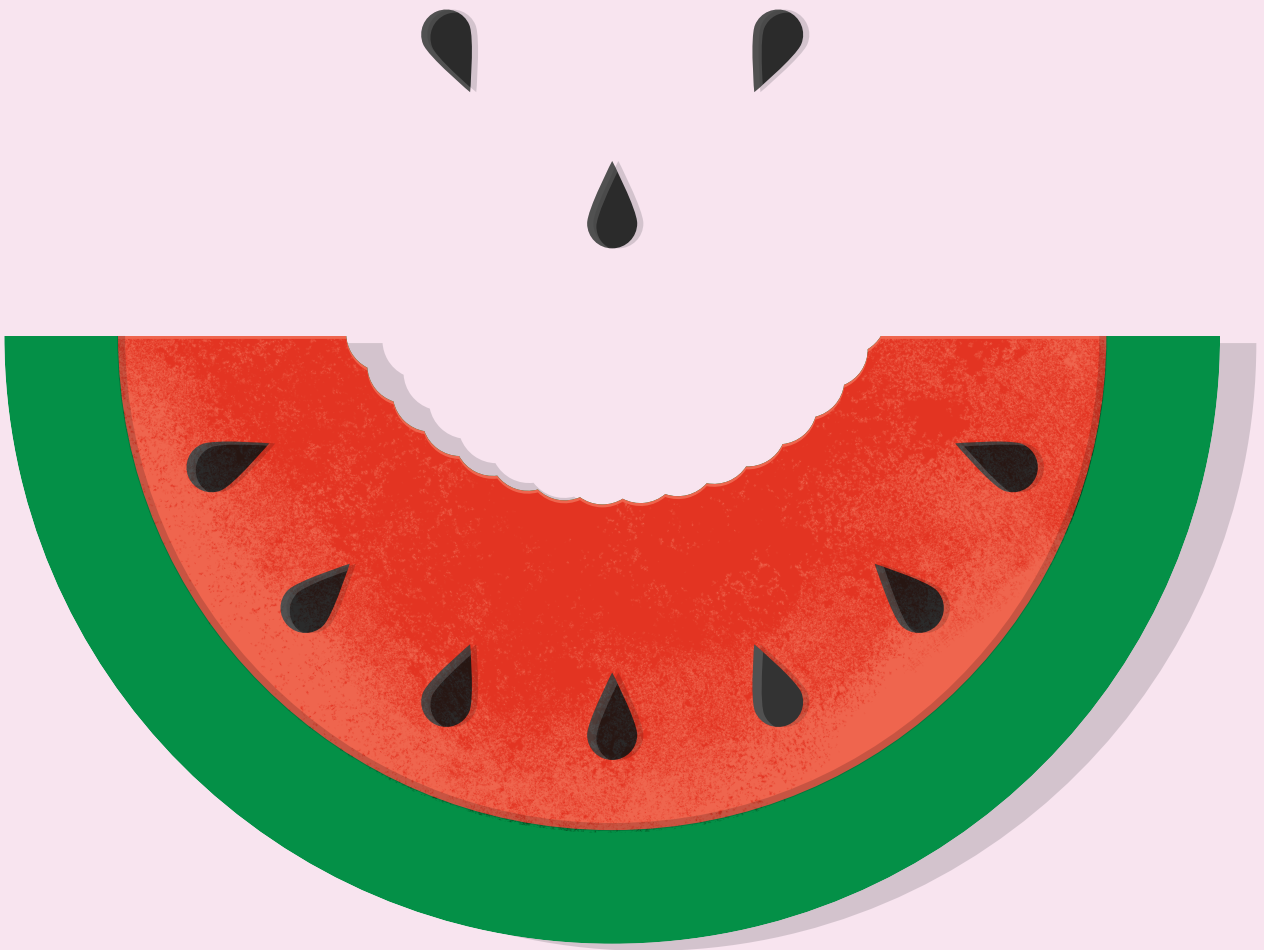
But don't forget to stay in touch with friends who don't have children. Long-standing friendships are too special to give up on.

Friendships are important because they're good for your health, improve your happiness, reduce stress and boost your self-confidence.

**Karen Makin,**  
Optometrist, Bupa Australia

### 3.

## Be good to your body



*“Fill your freezer full of as much food as possible that’s quick and easy to prepare. Ensure people around you concentrate on looking after you, so you can focus on the baby.”*

Mum of one



## Be good to your body

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For your wellbeing and that of your child, parents need to exercise regularly and eat well.

Gentle exercise outside and getting some fresh air can improve your mood – and if you have a little one, it can help your baby to sleep: winning!

Walking is one of the easiest ways to get active and become healthier, and it also helps your mental wellbeing. Walking with friends is a great way to take time out and to socialise, and with family it can bring you closer together.

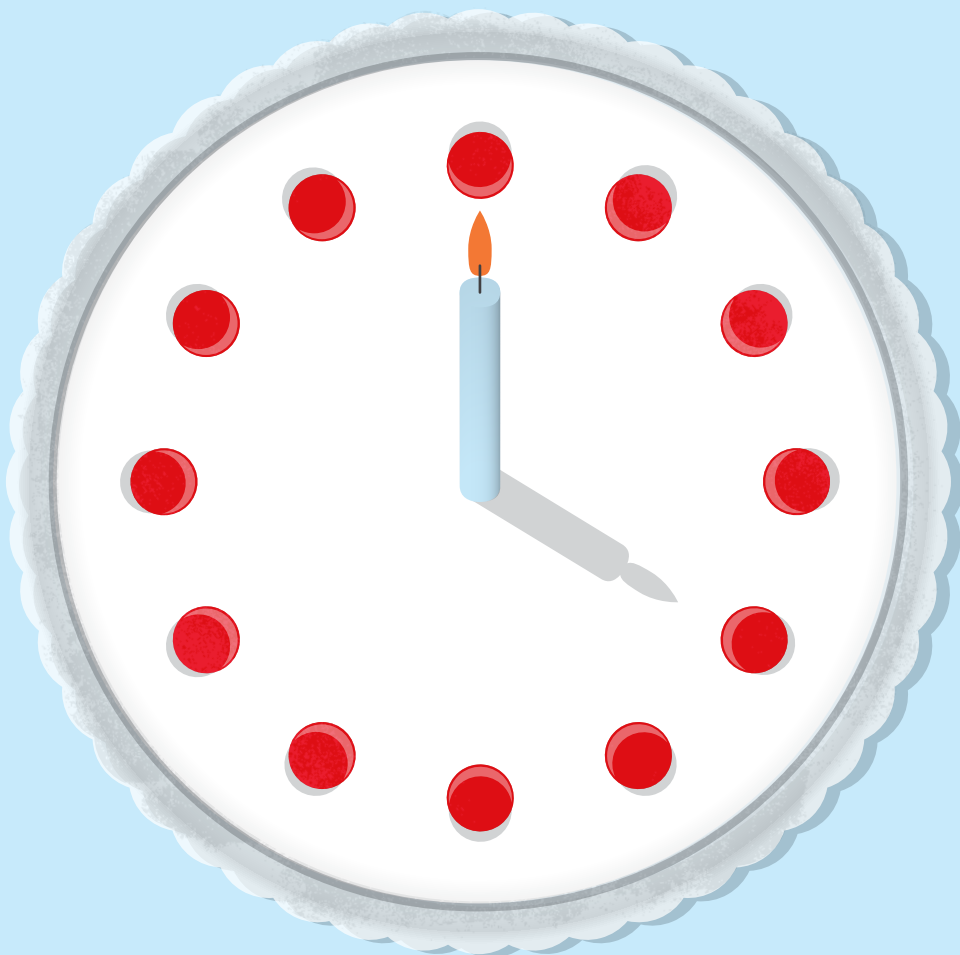
Food-wise, the guidelines for post-pregnancy mums are to choose starchy food as a base, plus fibre-rich options and five portions of fruit and veg a day. If you're breastfeeding, avoid alcohol, caffeine, and too much of certain fish. For busy working mums and dads it's important to have a healthy, balanced diet to help banish tiredness. Eating at regular intervals, not missing breakfast, cutting out sugar and eating iron rich foods will be key to keep you going!

**Julio de la Morena,**

Doctor of Sports Medicine, Sanitas (Bupa in Spain)

4.

## Plan your day ahead



*“Try asking yourself: Can it wait or is there someone else who can do it? You’ll soon start to wonder how you thought you were so busy before you had a child.”*

Dad of two

## Plan your day ahead

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There are only so many hours in the day – or so you used to think. As the parent of a new-born, you have already found that time is fluid and it's not your own.

Finding that you can no longer fit everything into your day can come as a shock but the key to keeping your sanity is first to accept this and then take back as much control as you can.

Don't sweat the small stuff. Plan your day around mini goals that you can achieve, while trying not to feel guilty putting off tasks that can wait.

Studies have shown that setting small achievable goals increases overall productivity by up to 15%, while at the same time making you feel happier in yourself for getting through things.

And get help if you're overwhelmed. If you have other children, get them involved in helping with daily tasks.

**Tim Ross,**

Director of Medical Services, Bupa Australia

## 5. Give yourself headspace



*“Make time for yourself – read a book,  
have a cup of tea, or get your nails done.  
Housework doesn’t matter. Your sanity does.”*

Mum of two

## Give yourself headspace

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Before you have kids, you think you'll be a loving and thoughtful mum or dad who totally engages with your children. But the reality is often more stressful than you imagine.

Life is so fast-paced nowadays it's hard not to get frazzled. We juggle multiple priorities such as trying to be outstanding at work, being a good friend, keeping a tidy home, and stocking a full fridge.

When it's all getting too much, practising mindfulness can help you remain calm. Being mindful is about stepping out of our habitual behaviours and into the moment. It includes a mix of meditation techniques that can help you manage thoughts and feelings.

There are few things more challenging than bringing up a child, and mindfulness can boost your ability to adapt to ever-changing situations.

**Jane Bozier,**

Nurse and mindfulness practitioner, Bupa UK

6.

## Don't take yourself too seriously



*“It’s normal to have ‘whoopsie’ moments as a parent! Just when you think you’ve taken the crown, someone else will come along with a worse story!”*

Mum of three

## Don't take yourself too seriously

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Few would argue that it's a serious responsibility being a new parent but everyone has funny or embarrassing moments they'd rather forget.

Whether it's breastfeeding for the first time in public, dealing with a toddler having a meltdown or realising you've been walking through town with sick down your shoulder, parenthood can be stressful.

If you don't laugh about it, what's the alternative?

Many studies have been done on the healing power of laughter. Research shows it helps turn negatives into positives, and reduces the psychological effects of stress. It also serves to bond people – an important point when you're chatting to other new mums and dads.

So, try to take pleasure in the company of your children, however embarrassing they're being. Or share the moment... we've all been there.

**Sasha Lynn,**

Psychologist working with Bupa Australia

7.

## Look at the bigger picture



*“I worry about keeping my son safe from harm, while allowing him enough freedom to explore the world around him as he grows.”*

Mum of one



## Look at the bigger picture

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Sometimes you're so focused on your baby that it's hard to put your parenting into context.

We worry over everything our children will face, from walking to school to the state of the planet. Yet, youngsters all over the world are raised in very different circumstances, survive and become very well-adjusted adults.

Don't be anxious about making the odd mistake. There is no single, right way of being a parent. We all do things differently. In Spain, children go to bed around 10pm. Japanese kids take the Tokyo subway on their own. Norwegians put their children into nursery at one year old.

Looking at the way other cultures bring up their children can free you from worry, helping you to relax and let your kids discover the wonders of the world for themselves.

**Meera Joshi,**  
Doctor, Bupa UK

## 8. Confront your fears



*“It used to be the bogeyman that our daughter thought was under the bed. Now it’s crawled under mine!”*

Dad of one

## Confront your fears

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If you believe the stories, dangers we can't control are around every corner.

You're not alone if you feel anxious about your children's safety, whether it's over a cough that never disappears, a new rash or bullying at school. Yet it's important not to let fear distort reality.

If you worry about your children's safety all the time, remember that the best way to make them safer is to give them the tools to protect themselves. Whether it's educating them about appropriate forms of contact, or letting them climb a climbing frame without holding them, it will give them and you the confidence that they know what to do.

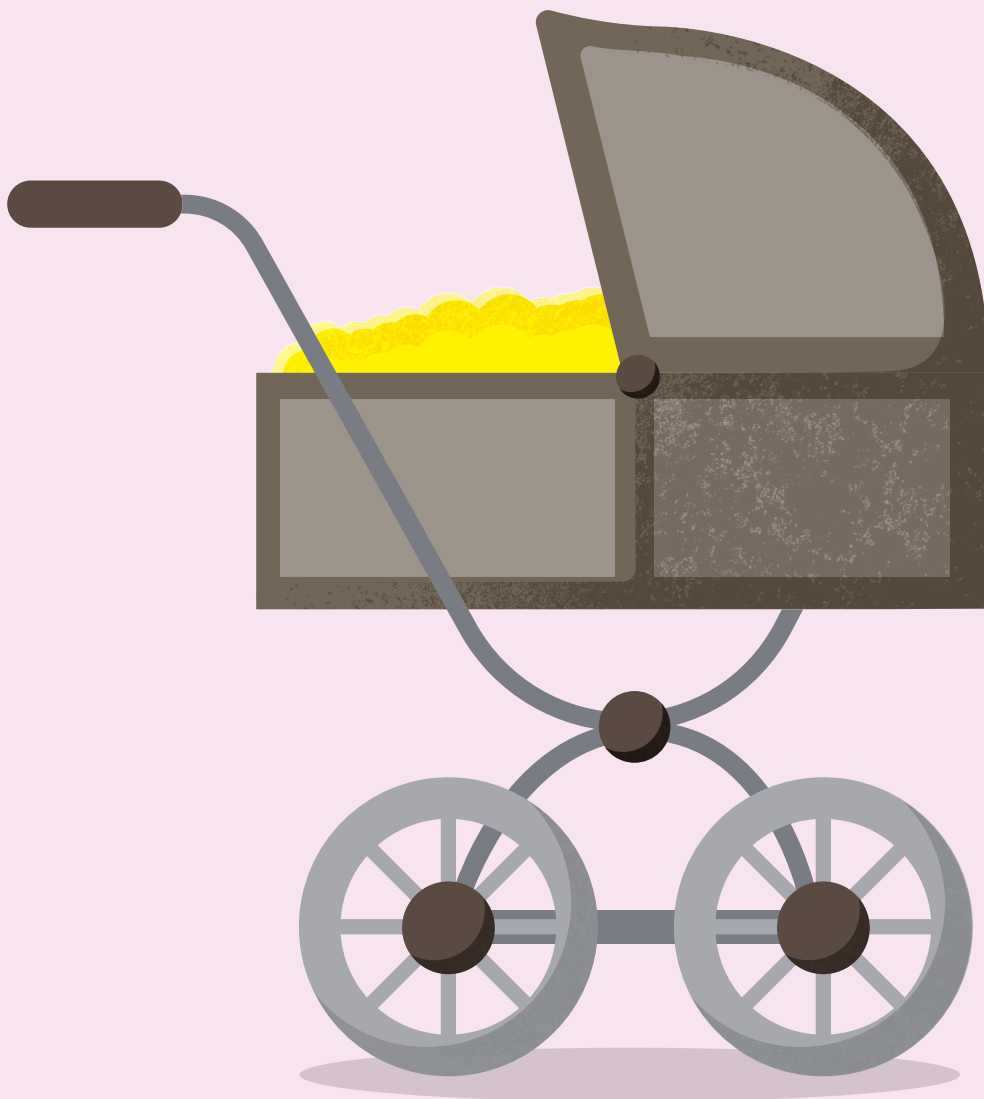
Fear can threaten to overwhelm us. Challenge irrational fears, take time out to relax in a way that suits you, and aim to put the situation into perspective. You cannot control everything and neither should you aim to.

**Kate Tong,**

Psychologist, Quality HealthCare (Bupa in Hong Kong)

9.

## Treasure your time with your children



*“Enjoy it all while they’re young.  
They grow up so fast.”*

Dad of one

## Treasure your time with your children

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Babies don't stay little for long – even if those first sleepless nights may seem like the longest hours of your life.

Suddenly they're five and it's their first day at school. So, relax into the moment and treat everything as if it's for the last time.

Having a child brings a lot of changes at a personal level, but also to our social and working life. There's no point acting as if nothing had changed, so give yourself time to get used to the new situation. It's normal if after the birth you don't feel 100% happy – it's called baby blues and it usually disappears 10-12 days after the birth, but call your doctor if it remains for longer.

Enjoy and treasure your time with your baby, but also remember it's okay not to love every minute of it. None of us likes everything we do all the time, so why should being a parent be any different?

**Dr Ignasi Segura,**

Gynaecologist, Sanitas (Bupa in Spain)

# 10. Ask for help



*“Don’t worry about the mess,  
and take all offers of help.”*

Mum of one

## Ask for help

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Parents of new babies often feel conflicted. On one hand, they're nervous about what they could do wrong. On the other, they don't like to give up control.

Accepting help isn't a sign that you can't cope. You know your child best, but the little one will be fine with other people you trust like grandparents or close friends.

It's the perfect opportunity to get some 'you time', as well as 'couple time' with your partner, which is something equally as important. There's no doubt that the baby is the priority, but looking after yourself, as well as continuing to enjoy the activities you loved to do before the baby was born, is key to maintaining an emotional balance.

Too often, new parents put themselves at the bottom of their list of priorities. But research shows that children learn by watching you. Don't let them conclude that parents put themselves last – show them you need to value yourself.

**Gabriela Gómez,**

Psychologist, Sanitas (Bupa in Spain)

