



Working with difficult babies

Being a new mum isn't easy and capturing the first photographs of your new arrival is just one more thing to think about at a time when you're still trying to adapt. It's so easy to look at online images of perfectly groomed new mums or perfect sleeping babies and just add more pressure to yourself to live up to that image.

Here, I'd like to give you a little peek behind the scenes of newborn photoshoots, talk about how we'll deal with more difficult babies and hopefully take away some of the potential stress if your baby decides not to be as cooperative as we'd like on the day of your session.

❖ Have you ever wondered why photographers book out up to 3 hours (sometimes more) for a newborn session?

No matter how perfect and adorable your new baby is, even the most enthusiastic photographer will struggle to fill 3 hours continuously taking photographs! The truth is that it takes time to get a newborn comfortable, settled and photoshoot ready. It really isn't at all unusual for an hour to pass at the beginning of a session before I even pick up the camera. Add in nappy changes, top-up feeds and the occasional tantrum and only about 45 minutes out of a 3 hour session may actually be spent taking photographs.

Yes, there are rare sessions where a baby is asleep on arrival and continues to sleep through clothing changes, being picked up, being put down and generally moved around – but those really are the exceptions!

Like most newborn photographers I always invest some time up front in getting the baby relaxed and comfortable, rather than rushing into taking photos and upsetting him/her for the rest of the session. Once your baby is settled we can usually move through a range of different poses and set ups very quickly, causing minimal disruption.

However, there's always a chance that baby will be particularly fussy on the day and make our lives that bit more challenging. Below are some explanations of how I deal with my most difficult models!

❖ Preparing in advance

If you haven't done so already, take a little time to read through the help card titled "Preparing for your newborn session". This takes you through all the things that you can do ahead of your session to give us the best chance of a happy, sleepy baby. If despite of all the preparations, baby still decides to be awkward on the day, don't get stressed over it – I still have plenty of tricks up my sleeve to deal with every eventuality.

❖ Adapting your session plan

Prior to starting your newborn session, we will always have a consultation to discuss your preferences for style, poses, colour schemes etc. Following on from that discussion I'll prepare an outline plan for the photoshoot and the shots that we're intending to take so that you know what to expect.

When it comes to your session though, your baby is the boss and we may need to adapt some elements of our plan to fit with what he/she will allow us to do.

❖ Picking appropriate poses

Even if we've meticulously planned out the baby poses for your photoshoot, there are times when a baby will just not tolerate being placed into a particular position. Babies aren't shy in telling us when they're unhappy and I will never continue with a pose if it's clearly causing distress. In these cases, we may need to fall back on an alternative pose that can still give you the general look and feel that you want but which may be less stressful for baby.

Poses that may prove challenging include :

Head on hands poses: There are certain poses where getting your baby into a state of deep sleep is absolutely essential. These include most of the head on hands positions and any other pose which requires precise positioning of baby's hands or feet.

Tummy lying: Tummy lying for supervised photographs is perfectly safe, but it's probably not a position that your baby is accustomed to and even the most laidback babies will sometimes protest at being turned onto their fronts. While being in an extremely deep sleep isn't always essential for these poses, we do need baby to at least be snoozy enough so that we can manipulate his/her head into a safe position without any wriggling around

If any of these types of poses were on your wish-list, but baby isn't going to cooperate on the day, we may need to substitute one of the alternatives below.

Baby lying on back: The simplest pose that there is and one that can be dressed up with wraps, props and rugs to give it an artistic feel. Most babies can be positioned comfortably on their back and the beauty of this position is that it doesn't matter whether he/she is asleep or awake.

Baby lying on side: This is a really versatile pose that most babies are comfortable with and which can be used with baby both asleep and awake.

❖ Swaddling

Every new parent knows that there are times when even tiny newborns will be completely wide awake and some babies are simply more active and alert by nature. Although most newborn sessions focus on sleepy shots there's a chance that your baby may stay awake for all or part of your session.

If sleep just isn't going to happen during your photoshoot, the biggest challenge will always be containing arms and legs. As long as baby is happy and content, photos with his/her eyes open can work really well. However, wakeful babies also tend to be wriggly babies and arms and legs all over the place can ruin an image.

We may have already planned on some swaddled shots as part of your session plan, but even if we haven't, this technique really helps with wriggly babies by keeping arms and legs tight to the body and achieving those cute, curled up poses. Being swaddled can also be comforting for fussy babies and will often help them to settle into position.

❖ Props

During your consultation we will have most likely decided on whether we'll be using baskets and containers, sticking with simple shots of baby on blankets or a combination of both.

Each baby is an individual though, and while most will be happy with either set up, we'll sometimes find that a baby who feels too exposed lying on a blanket will snuggle beautifully into a basket and a baby who hates the feel of being inside a container is perfectly settled lying on a blanket.

Depending on your baby's own preferences we may need to compromise on the planned set ups and adapt to something that works better for him/her.

❖ Parent and Baby Photos

If we've agreed to include parent and baby shots as part of your session, my usual workflow is to leave these until right at the end. By the time we're wrapping up, it may be approaching time for the next feed or baby might be starting to get a bit grizzly and fed up with being re-positioned. I find that being cradled in mum or dad's arms is a nice way to finish off the session and help soothe babies who are starting to become a little fidgety.

However, if we're having difficulty getting the baby settled, I will often recommend bringing the parent and baby photos forward so that we can cover those shots off while hopefully settling baby to sleep in your arms ready for their solo shots.

❖ Prioritising your most important images

I guarantee a choice of at least 20 different photographs from every session. Although a typical newborn photoshoot will usually result in closer to 30, the final number is very much dependent on how settled the baby is on the day and how many different set ups he/she will tolerate.

During your consultation we'll have already discussed the photographs that you'd like to achieve and which ones are the absolute 'must-haves'. If on the day, baby is being less than cooperative and we're not be able to achieve everything that we'd planned for I will always aim to prioritise the photos that are most important to you first and move on from there.

❖ Most importantly . . .

. . . Don't let yourself become stressed about your photoshoot!

Unless we're extremely lucky and baby sleeps right through, the chances are good that we'll have a bit of crying at some point during the session, we will very likely need to pause for a couple of nappy changes or top-up feeds and we'll spend quite a bit of time getting baby settled into position. This is all a perfectly normal part of most newborn sessions.

If, despite our best efforts, we still struggle getting baby to settle, don't worry. Every newborn photographer encounters more challenging babies from time to time, it's part of the job and it certainly won't be the first time that it has happened. I'll work with you during the session to change and adapt things as we go along and work with your baby's mood on the day to make sure that we still capture some beautiful photographs for you to cherish.