

Life hacks to help care for children

A resource for patients, by patients

Are you contemplating a step into parenthood and live with inflammatory arthritis? You probably have a few questions about what this means and how to manage day-to-day parenting tasks like feeding, diapering, picking up your child and using car seats. We have developed a number of life hacks, or adaptations, to help you better navigate these day-to-day activities. You can also consult an occupational therapist who can provide advice and suggest aids and alternative ways to complete tasks. [Mamas Facing Forward](#) has a lot of great resources and you can speak with other parents with chronic illness on their [Facebook page](#).

Feeding your child

Newborns need to feed at least eight times a day in the first three months, so whether you are breastfeeding or bottle feeding, feeding your child is a physical process. Here are a few tips to help manage feeding:

- Make sure you are in a comfortable position that does not put additional strain on your body. A nursing pillow can be very useful to maintain proper positioning and minimize the strain on your shoulders – even if you are bottle feeding. You can use pillows or you can consider products like [My Brest Friend](#)* and a [Boppy](#)*.
- There are many medications that are compatible with breastfeeding so read [our resource](#) on medications and pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Making decisions on how to feed your baby is a personal one that is best made by you. There is a lot of pressure on new Moms that “breast is best,” but it is not necessarily the best choice, especially for one living with a chronic illness. Breastfeeding adds extra physical strain on a new mom.
- The [Fed is Best foundation](#) offers resources to support moms feeding their children, no matter how your child is fed. You can listen to [this podcast](#) with Mariah Leach and Cheryl Crow as they speak about breastfeeding with autoimmune arthritis.
- If you are breastfeeding, test out the closure systems on nursing bras and tank tops to make sure your fingers can handle them.

- If planning on using a breast pump, consider getting a hands-free pumping bra that will keep the pump in place without straining hands and wrists.
- If you are bottle feeding, look at different brands of bottles to see which are easiest to hold and how difficult they are to wash. Baby's preferences may limit choice too.

Using car seats

You may have limited dexterity and strength in your hands making it difficult to get your child in and out of the car seat, or ensure the buckles are properly secured. Here are a few tips to help you manage car seats:

- Test out car seats in the store. Try to find the one that can be most easily opened and puts the least amount of pressure on your joints.
- Infant car seats can be lifted in and out of the car, but it can be difficult to carry your child and the car seat around.
- Convertible car seats can be helpful when your child gets heavier, and you cannot carry them in their car seat. The downside is that you will need to buckle them in and out of the car each time which can be hard on your hands and wake them up if they are sleeping!
- It may be easier to get your child in and out of their car seat if you insert one arm between their legs while supporting the rest of their body with the other arm. This uses your larger muscles and joints that may better handle their weight.
- When your child gets a little older, encourage them to get into their seats and tie up their buckles independently. After they are done, check to ensure everything is properly placed and follows appropriate safety standards.

"Be prepared for how fatigued you will be, be prepared with how your joints will handle carrying, rocking, holding baby for many hours a day. Be prepared & set up a meal train with friends & family definitely for the first 2-3 weeks, have pre-frozen ready to use meat, or even better, ready to bake meals. Find resources on the best RA friendly mom products to make life easier for a newborn & beyond. Above all I tell new mamas to not be afraid to admit they need HELP. "

- Consider using the [Buckle Bopper*](#) or [Unbuckle Me*](#), a product that can help you open a car seat. Visit their website to learn more and the product is available through various retailers. [Bucklebee*](#) is another option but it is better suited to older children.
- Tie up the buckles at the **top** of the car seat first in order to secure your (often wiggling) child. This will make it easier to tie them in the bottom of the car seat.
- Loosen up the straps to make it easier to get the straps over your child's arms. Be careful to tighten them again to respect the appropriate safety standards.
- Recruit older children to help you in getting the baby or child in the car seat. Even if they cannot get their sibling in the seat, they may be able to attach the buckles. After they are done, check to ensure everything is properly secured and respects safety standards.
- Consider applying for an accessible parking pass that may help you manage day-to-day activities with your children in tow. You can choose when you use it as this can depend on how you are feeling or what is going on.

Picking up and carrying your child

Picking up and carrying your child can be challenging if you have joint issues in your upper body. Consider the following tips to help manage these activities:

- Pick your baby up with your larger joints, resting your baby on the inner part of your forearm near your elbows. It may be easier to hold your baby if you insert one arm between their legs while supporting the rest of their body with the other arm.
- Bend your knees to help ensure not too much weight is on your lower back and the extremities of your arms.
- Read [this article](#) for an excellent overview of the various baby-wearing gear. Some things to consider when purchasing baby-wearing gear are:
 - Test out or borrow baby-wearing gear before purchasing to see which one works best for you and your child.

"I've had three children along with rheumatoid arthritis. I had amazing, good health while pregnant, flares after. With good health care, family help, and being proactive, these were fabulous moments in my life! I'm now a grandma! My saying "if there's a will, there's a way".

- Remember your child may have certain preferences too. Be sure that they are part of the testing process.
 - Make sure you can use the baby-wearing gear independently. You can never be sure if someone will be around to help you use it.
 - Use baby-wearing gear for short periods of time then slowly extend to longer periods of time.
 - Be careful in purchasing any child carriers with buckles if your hands have limited dexterity and strength. It may be very difficult to get these open if you are alone and do not have help.
 - Consider buying good quality second-hand baby-wearing gear – in this case someone else has worn it in and the buckles may be easier to open. Be careful that the gear still meets current safety standards.
- Have your child climb up to you when you are sitting on a chair or bed. It may be easier to hold your child and then get up from the sitting position, rather than bending down and picking up your child. It is important to ensure you have the necessary joint stability and lower body strength.
 - Encourage independence early. The sooner your children can get themselves into the car seat, feeding seat, stroller, etc., means less pressure on your joints. Children as young as a year can be extremely perceptive and can assist in making many things easier for you while building their own independence and self esteem at the same time, a win-win for all.
 - There are a lot of great tips on [How to Protect your Body while Parenting a Big Kid: Tips from an OT Mom](#) including big kid toileting and hygiene, showering and bathing, feeding and eating, moving items around and more.

Diapering your child

New parents will be changing diapers up to 10-15 times per day for newborns and for several years to come until your child is toilet trained. Consider the following tips to help manage this common activity:

- Consider how you set up the diaper changing area like whether you use a changing table and the height of the change table. Depending on which joints cause the most trouble, it might make sense to set up the area at a higher level or consider ground level.

- Set up all of your supplies (e.g., diapers, wipes, cream) in one location so they are all available when you need them. Remember your child will get increasingly active and squirmy and you will need to keep a hand on them at all times to keep them safe and still get the job done!
 - Cloth diapering might be an option but consider testing out different brands before buying. Some have Velcro, while others use pins, and you will need to consider what is easiest for your body.
-

Dressing your child

Trying to dress your child at any age can be challenging. When your child is an infant, you will be responsible for bearing the full weight of their bodies and supporting their necks while getting their clothes on. It may become easier as they age but then they begin to move and wiggle around! Here are a few tips on how you can adapt this task:

- Consider purchasing clothing with zippers instead of snaps which can be more difficult to open if arthritis has affected your hands. This is especially important for pajamas that you will be changing clothing in the middle of the night!
 - Baby gowns or sack-like clothing can be considered when your child is an infant.
 - Consider using Velcro shoes on your child as tying laces is more difficult with arthritis in the hands.
 - When choosing clothing, carefully consider what is easier for you to put on your child, such as elastic waistbands and cotton clothing which provides more give/flexibility. Clothing with buttons may be difficult to put on your child particularly when they start wiggling and squirming!
 - Encourage independence in your toddler or preschooler. If you have bought clothing that is easier for you to put on them, it is likely easier for them to put on too!
 - Have a favourite toy, even your smart phone to distract a wiggling toddler who does not want to lay still for a diaper change.
-

Buying baby equipment

There is a lot of different equipment out there for new parents to consider purchasing, such as strollers, play yards, feeding seats and more. Here are a few tips on how you can make some smart purchases:

- Test everything out in advance – do not leave the store until you are sure this is a piece of equipment you can use independently!
- Advise family carefully on purchases. Strongly encourage them to consult with you prior to purchasing anything or give them guidance on what brands and features you need.

*** Specific product recommendations are based on personal use only. CAPA and Mamas Facing Forward have no connection or relationship with any company or product mentioned.**