

Infant Crying: "I'm Trying To Tell You Something!"

Being a parent can be one of the most satisfying jobs we will do. It can also be one of the hardest. One of the first challenges new parents face is how to deal with a crying baby. Crying is a normal, everyday event in the lives of most babies. Since they can't talk right away, crying is the only way babies have to communicate that they need something. But even though we know crying is natural, it can still be stressful and upsetting. Learning more about why infants cry can help you feel more patient and confident and do a better job of meeting the needs of your baby.

For Babies, Crying Is Communicating

Infant crying is the most important way babies have of communicating their needs. Babies don't have spoken words to tell us what they need or like or feel. Instead, they have a language all their own. Feet-kicking, hand-waving, head-turning, and different kinds of cries are the "words." Since adults speak a different language, it can be tricky at first to figure out what a crying baby is saying. Dealing with a crying infant is most upsetting when you can't understand what your baby needs or can't make the crying stop. However, with observation, patience, and the experience of trying different things, you can learn a lot about what your baby is saying with his cries.



All infants cry some of the time. Some infants cry very little while others cry a great deal. Some are easy to calm, while others can be more difficult to soothe. Some babies cry very intensely while others whimper. Babies may differ in how they cry, but why they cry is almost always for the same general reason: they need something. Babies cry when they are hungry or sick. They cry when they feel uncomfortable, like when they are wet or too hot or too cold. Babies cry if they are lonely, bored, or tired, and when they are in pain. You can learn to recognize many of these cries and give the baby prompt attention.

Some situations make it harder for you to understand what the baby is trying to tell you. For example, the cries of a baby who was born several months too early are sometimes harder to figure out than those of full-term babies. A baby who is sick may have a cry that is harder to understand than the cry of a healthy baby. Still, even in these

circumstances, you can learn to understand what the baby needs.

When Crying Is Hard To Figure Out

Sometimes babies cry for reasons that even the most sensitive parents cannot understand. When you have figured out that the baby is not hungry, wet, sick, hot, cold, bored, tired, or in pain, try other things to help your baby feel better. (Remember that whatever you try may not work immediately. Give your baby time to notice the change and calm down. Then, if it doesn't work, try something else.)

- Play some soft music.
- Pat her back and let her hear your soothing voice.
- Let her listen to a repeating sound, such as a low thumping noise or an electric shaver.
- Walk with her.
- Rock her.
- Hum or sing to her.
- Fill a hot water bottle with warm (not hot!) water and lay it next to her.
- Try a pacifier, or help her find her thumb to suck on.
- Try to bring up a bubble with gentle burping.
- Change the position of the baby:
 - Cradle him, face up, in your arms at different angles.
 - Prop him upright so he looks over your shoulder.
 - Hold him in front of you with his back to your stomach.

—Lay him on his stomach across your lap.

Taking the time to understand your baby's cries will pay off later. We know that a baby who has her needs met in a sensitive, appropriate way in the first few months is more likely to cry less later. Responding promptly to your baby's cries is not going to create a spoiled child. In fact, it will actually promote her development in important ways. It will also help her to feel that her world is safe and predictable.

Constant Crying

Sometimes, no matter what parents do, they cannot seem to soothe their infants. Often people call this kind of constant crying "colic." We still don't know exactly what causes colic. Some think a colicky baby has gas, indigestion, or food allergies. Others think colic happens when the baby is fed too much or too little.

It's important to realize that you are not to blame for a baby's constant crying. It's also important to remember that babies don't cry to annoy us or because they think we are bad parents. Babies are not capable of thinking these things. Nevertheless, you are likely to find yourself feeling frustrated and angry or guilty. This tension can build to the point where you feel you are at your wit's end.

At this point there are several things you can do:

- Take a break. Have someone else take care of the baby for a while if that's possible. Otherwise, put the baby in a comfortable and safe place, such as a crib, and then walk away and let the child cry while you calm down.

- Try carrying the baby around in a carrying pouch or

moving with the baby in a soothing, rhythmic activity. Let the baby know you love her and want her to feel better.

- Remind yourself of the times during the day when your baby didn't cry.

- Remember to tell yourself that it will not always be like this. Babies usually recover from being colicky by the time they are about 3 months old. Finally, no matter how upset you feel, do not grab or shake the baby. This will not stop the crying and it can cause severe injury or even death.

It Takes Two To Communicate

It takes two people to communicate—one to talk and the other to listen. Parents must listen and be observant to discover what their infants are saying. Just like babies, parents also differ in their abilities to communicate. Some parents find it is easy to understand what their babies need. Others find it harder. Several things make it harder for an adult to listen and understand. Sometimes, when parents don't have much experience with babies, they become impatient and frustrated and stop trying to understand what the baby needs. If parents are very tired, it is harder for them to understand what the baby is trying to communicate. Also, when parents are under a lot of stress, understanding the baby's cries can be very difficult.

Good parenting is a lot of work, and sometimes it leaves you worn out. When you feel like you are running low on energy, patience, or understanding, there are some things you can do that will help.

- Talk with experienced and kind parents.

- Get support from people who are understanding and encouraging.

- Take a break by having someone else look after your baby for a little while (trade baby-sitting for doing something helpful for him or her in return later).

If you are interested in other ideas about how to take care of yourself as a parent, you may want to read another publication in this series, Extension publication HE-674, "Taking Care Of The Parent: Replacing Stress With Peace."

It takes time and patience to communicate and understand babies. It may be helpful to remember that very few parents know exactly the right thing to do when their babies cry. But good parents know that taking the time to understand their baby's cries is a very important step toward meeting their baby's needs. And meeting your infant's needs is the first step along the path to building a strong and satisfying relationship with your child.

Other Readings Of Interest

Sammons, W. A. H. (1989). *The Self-Calmed Baby*. Boston: Little Brown.

Brazelton, T. B. (1983). *Infants and Mothers: Differences in Development*. New York: Delacorte.



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