

From the Research Corner



A Parenting Myth:  
*Can I Spoil My Baby?*

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One question we hear frequently from parents is, “If I pick my baby up every time he cries, won’t I spoil him? After reviewing a number of parenting books and research articles, I found that everywhere I turned the answer was the same. No, you cannot spoil your baby! According to child development expert Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, it’s impossible to spoil a child in the first year of life.

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that babies can’t be spoiled, a national survey shows that many parents still subscribe to this parenting myth. According to this survey, 57% of parents of young children (aged 0 to 6), 64% of grandparents, and 62% of future parents believe that a six-month old infant is not too young to be spoiled. However, contrary to this pervasive parenting myth, child development research shows that responding to an infant’s needs actually helps to create children who are emotionally secure and independent.

*How did this spoiling myth come about?*

The spoiling myth seems to have begun in the 1920’s, when experts began telling parents that they should refrain from picking up their babies every time they cried. These experts believed that if parents were “too responsive” to infant crying, the child would become clingy and dependent. But there was no scientific evidence for this theory. It was based on opinion, not fact, and



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subsequent research has proved the myth wrong. However, despite new information, it seems that the spoiling myth has been handed down from generation to generation and still influences many parents today.

*What does research tell us about responding to infant crying?*

When your infant cries she is trying to tell you that she needs something—food, a loving touch, a diaper change, or perhaps she does not feel well. Crying is her way of communicating with you. When you consistently respond to her crying and meet her needs in a positive manner, she learns that you are a reliable and safe source of comfort that she can trust. She feels connected to you and loved. This is especially important during the first year of life. Such positive parental response

helps children feel emotionally secure, tolerate separation from their parents when they are older, and learn to trust themselves. It builds their confidence, assures children that parents and other caregivers will be there for them during times of need, and eventually helps infants learn how to soothe themselves, resulting in less crying and fussiness.

As your baby grows into a toddler, the security he felt when his cries were responded to as an infant increases his confidence in trying new things, because he knows that he can come back to you for safety and comfort when he needs it. These interactions help to strengthen the parent-child bond, or attachment, a life-long emotional connection between you and your child that helps him grow into an independent person and achieve success in school and in life.

You know your baby's needs better than anyone. Ignore well-meaning advice from those who subscribe to the spoiling myth and trust your instincts when your baby cries. Pick her up and reassure her that you are there to help her learn how to manage her world. You may not always be able to decipher exactly what your baby's cries are trying to tell you, but, with time, practice, and patience you will become an expert. And knowing that someone cares enough to figure out and respond to her needs will give her the foundation she needs to explore and grow.

**Resources for Parents:**

Born to Feel

Getting In Tune With Baby

Mommy is this Okay?

Speaking Parentese

Touchpoints Birth to 3: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development, by T. Berry Brazelton, 2006, De Capo Press.

**References:**

Brazelton, T. B. (1992). *Touchpoints birth to 3: Your child's emotional and behavioral development*. New York: Perseus Publishing.

DYG Inc. (2000). *What grown-ups understand about child development: A national benchmark survey*: Civitas Initiative, Zero To Three, BRIO Corporation.

Sears, W., & Sears, M. (1993). *The baby book: Everything you need to know about your baby--from birth to age two (1st ed.)*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.