

What to do when your baby cries

by Aletha Solter, Ph.D.

Crying babies are a source of concern for many parents. When your baby cries and you don't know why, it can bring up feelings of anxiety, helplessness, frustration, incompetence, and even anger and hostility. There is much advice about crying babies, but most of it fails to explain the real reasons for crying, and offers suggestions that are damaging to your baby's emotional development.

Why do babies cry?

There are two reasons why babies cry. One reason is to communicate a need or discomfort. Perhaps they are hungry, bored, cold, or they just want to be held. Sometimes it is hard to figure out what they need. The role of parents and caretakers is to try to fill babies' needs as promptly and as accurately as possible. Babies cannot be "spoiled." It is impossible to give them too much love, attention, and physical contact.

The second reason for crying during infancy is less well understood. Many babies continue to cry even after all of their basic needs have been met, and even while they are being held. This kind of crying, which peaks at around six weeks of age, has been called "colic" or "irritable crying." It can last several hours a day. The traditional explanations for this crying have focused on possible physical problems such as gas pains or indigestion. However, research has shown that most babies with "colic" have nothing wrong with their digestion, and are usually in excellent health. It is therefore necessary to consider the possible emotional reasons for crying.

Infants are quite vulnerable, and have a considerable amount of emotional pain resulting from an accumulation of stressful experiences. Distress can be caused by a traumatic birth or difficulties after birth. Babies experience confusion as they attempt to understand the world, and they are easily frightened and overstimulated. In addition, they feel frustrated as they attempt to learn new skills and communicate. All of these result in emotional pain that is stored in the body.

Fortunately, babies come equipped with a repair kit, and can overcome the effects of stress through the natural healing mechanism of crying. Research has shown that people of all ages benefit from a good cry, and tears help to restore the body's chemical balance following stress. An infant who has been isolated in an incubator without human contact for several days may need to cry and rage for many hours over a period of months in order to release the emotional pain caused by such a terrifying and confusing experience. A three-month-old may need to have a long cry following a family reunion during which he was handled by many unfamiliar people. A six-month-old who has been trying to crawl forward all day and can only manage to go backwards may need, by the end of the day, to express his frustrations by crying and raging before he can drift peacefully off to sleep. Crying in these examples is not the hurt; it is the process of becoming unhurt.

How to respond to a crying baby

What can parents do? First of all, it is important to check for immediate needs and discomforts, such as hunger or coldness. But if your baby is still fussy after you have filled her basic needs, it is quite appropriate simply to hold her lovingly and allow her to continue crying. Babies need closeness and attention when they are crying. ***No baby should ever be left to cry alone.*** Even though you may feel ineffective holding your crying baby, in reality you are

providing her with much-needed emotional support while she is releasing stress in this manner. Your baby is not rejecting you when she is crying. She is simply feeling safe enough to show you her feelings, just as you yourself might burst into tears if a trusted person were to put his arm around you and acknowledge that you have had a hard day. Parents who hold their babies and allow them to express themselves in this manner, usually notice that their babies are relaxed and content after the crying spell, and sleep better at night.

Why is it so difficult to hold a crying baby and to accept the crying? Probably because few people were allowed to do all the crying they needed to do when they were little. Your parents might have tried to stop you from crying when you were a baby. Perhaps they gave you a pacifier, or fed, jiggled, or rocked you every time you cried, thinking this was what you needed at the moment. Perhaps they tried to distract you with toys, music, or games when all you needed was their undivided attention and love so that you could continue with your crying. They might have asked the doctor for sedatives to calm you down, or left you to cry alone, thinking there was nothing they could do. Perhaps they even hit you or yelled at you out of sheer frustration and desperation. As you grew older, perhaps you experienced more distractions or punishment from your parents and teachers as they became annoyed with your attempts to release your feelings by crying.

Your parents are not to be blamed, because they lacked information about the importance of crying. However, because of this childhood conditioning, you may find it hard to recognize this need in your own children, and may feel pulled to stop them from crying in similar ways. It takes time to undo a lifetime of conditioning. Perhaps you need to have a good cry yourself. My advice is to go right ahead. You will feel much better afterwards, and your baby's crying may seem a little more acceptable to you. If you find yourself becoming frustrated and exhausted because your baby cries a lot, you deserve all the help and support you can get.

Important note: This is not a “cry-it-out” approach. There is a huge difference between leaving a baby to cry alone in a crib and holding a crying baby lovingly in your arms, while providing comfort and reassurance. The advice in this article should not be used as a substitute for medical opinion and treatment. *If you suspect illness or pain, always consult with a doctor.*

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