

Crying & Your Baby

One of your baby's basic needs is: 'Hear Me!' and crying is your baby's way of being heard. Once, it was widely thought normal for babies to cry frequently, and/or for long periods. But it is not normal for a baby to cry a lot, nor is it healthy for them. Here we explore why babies cry, and what parents can do.

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Overview

When your baby is crying she has a need - perhaps she needs food, company, play, soothing, or sleep - and she has strong feelings. She may be feeling distress at being separated from you, anger at not having her needs met, or perhaps fear. All these are normal and frequent emotions for your baby. When she cries, she needs you to fulfill her physical need (e.g. food) as well as her emotional need (e.g. soothing words, loving touch).

You will learn to understand what she is communicating by her differing tones, volume and intensity. The best way to learn is to spend lots of time together, and notice how you feel: you may feel your body responding urgently to some cries, and less urgently to others.

Our courses explore many aspects of your baby's language, including crying ... and help you work out how to prevent upset, listen to your baby and minimise distress. We show you how to understand and respond to your baby's signals, and nurture a contented baby.

Next Page: Myths and Facts

Myth: Baby needs to cry to exercise her lungs, it's normal and healthy.

FACT: **Prolonged crying is never good for a baby.** Among other things it triggers excessive release of cortisol and adrenalin, which heighten the sensitivity of the nervous system, inhibit relaxation, disturb heart rate and breathing rhythm, and can lead to a fall in body temperature and a decrease in immune system function. The areas of the brain linked with anxiety become activated and the baby's entire body and mind become focused on self-preservation, rather than growth.

Myth: Baby needs to cry herself to sleep, it's good to leave her to settle herself.

FACT: **Babies are very sensitive to being separated; when separation distress sets in, a baby may become more distraught and feel intense emotional pain.** Babies who are left to 'cry themselves to sleep' may enter a state of 'protest-despair' where they stop crying not because they are feeling relaxed and safe, but because they have given up their effort to be heard, or have simply become too exhausted to carry on. They fall asleep with high levels of cortisol in their blood, and their bodies in an anxious state of tension.

Myth: Being left to cry won't hurt 'It never did me any harm'.

FACT: **Many parents were themselves, as babies, left to cry for prolonged periods** – it was the norm for much of the twentieth century and the parents' understanding at the time was that this would not have any repercussions. They did the best they knew how to do. But today the potential harm of prolonged crying is widely recognised (see above), and specialists in perinatal psychology are revealing how development of the emotional brain in babyhood strongly influences a person's ability later on, as a child and as an adult, to trust, to love and be loved, and to relax into sleep. There are some studies that suggest adult insomnia has its roots in the sleeping patterns of infancy, including any anxiety or upset connected with falling to sleep.

Protest and despair

Babies who are left to cry for long periods may eventually settle – not because they are ok, but because they have given up. This is described by neonatal specialists as ‘protest-despair’. When a baby is in despair and stops crying because they have given up their effort to be heard, or have simply become too exhausted to carry on, their bloodstream is flushed with stress hormones, whose prolonged flow can contribute to muscle tension, a fall in temperature, irregularity of breathing, reduced flow of growth hormones and reduced immune function. In the midst of all this a baby, however young, is learning lessons about the response they receive when distressed, and whether it is safe, and worthwhile, to express themselves. Such profound lessons are a vital part of a person’s developing ‘emotional intelligence’.

Babies need loving adults to be with them as they experience intense sensations in their new world, especially when they are stressed.

Consistent comfort

A baby whose distress is comforted consistently is likely to develop effective response systems in her brain. This is likely to enable her to manage stress well throughout her life. It's an amazing gift from parent to child.

You cannot spoil your baby!

You cannot spoil your baby! In the first year, babies cannot be spoiled as they are not able to manipulate their carers - their brains aren't mature enough. Nor can they learn to be independent - they may develop stress responses, or dissociate and become quiet, but they cannot manage their feelings any more than they can walk, talk, or find their own food: babies are totally dependent. Independence emerges when the need for dependence has been satisfied and a child develops the ability to self regulate.

In some families there's a lot of emphasis on independence, and fostering this from birth: but what a baby needs is to be dependent on those who care for her. When your baby knows you are there for her, she will feel safe and valued. This helps her brain to develop optimally and nurtures the ability to trust, which is a foundation for independence in later life.

Babies who feel secure tend to be confident and secure adults: babies who, on the other hand, feel insecure and unsure of their parents' attention, have a greater tendency to be anxious and fractious, both in childhood and as adults.

Leaving your baby to cry

It is never ok to leave your baby in a state of distress. It is not lengthy periods of crying that are a problem: it is prolonged *uncomforted* distress that can be distressing. All babies cry - and so will yours - but most need to be held and helped to calm down. It is helpful to know that babies who

have their needs met cry less, and in the long run do not behave like spoiled children. You cannot spoil a young baby: a baby who feels safe and has her needs met learns to trust.

Babies who are held and kept close do cry less – but attachment parenting is not a ‘cure all’. Babies also need to feel heard, and given the space to express themselves, and feel affirmed and have their feelings reflected back to them, in a safe and loving environment.,

On our courses we talk about crying, and discuss the eternally hot topic of crying before sleep, and ‘controlled crying’ as a method of ‘sleep training’ (for more on this, check our article on sleep).

The key is to listen, and respond according to what your heart tells you. Sometimes you will not be able to soothe your baby quickly, but it is still important for her to know you are there, accepting her as she expresses herself.

When you were a baby

If you were left to cry for lengthy periods as a baby, you may now find it difficult to hear your baby cry and your gut may drive you to respond immediately; or you may find it really difficult to be with your baby while she is crying.

What you felt as a baby will affect you today. Accepting this, and enquiring into your own experience, will help you to put things in perspective and tune into your baby’s needs, rather than settling your own discomfort. We go into this in depth on a Babiesknow weekend - you’ll be surprised how acknowledging your early experiences makes a huge difference to your confidence as a parent today: your baby will be less anxious and settle more easily. If you’re struggling, take time out. Having the support of family or good friend is invaluable.

A check list, when your baby is crying

1. Slow down.
2. Stay with your baby, preferably in touch, but if your baby signals a need for space, lie her safely and stay close.
3. Look, listen, connect.
4. Reflect what you see, and let your baby know you’re ok (‘Oh, I see you’re really upset right now. I’m here for you, it’s safe.’)
5. Make a mental check list of your baby’s needs (may be simple to satisfy, such as hunger; or more difficult, if you’re not sure what’s up, or your baby is unwell).
6. Check in with yourself – and your inner baby. If you feel upset, be honest with yourself, and confide in a friend. You may feel comfortable telling your baby a little about your feelings.
7. What support might you need – let your baby know you’re going to get it; maybe you can ask for support in the house now, or make a phone call; support may involve you taking time out.
8. Hang in there, and relax. Let go of what you are not doing and be in the moment with your baby while you are together.