



Infant Crying and Soothing

As professionals, we need to reassure parents that crying is normal for babies because cues and crying are their only forms of communication. Mothers often have an intuitive sense of what their babies need and can reduce their need for crying at least some of the time. In general, babies that are held cry less. We should aim to build parents' confidence in their ability to decipher cries and cues when possible while also reassuring them that sometimes babies simply need to cry. If they have researched “crying it out” methods and their babies are crying even when being held, remind them that crying in the arms does not produce the same stress hormones as an infant left alone to cry.

It is important to remember that babies are experiencing a huge transition from the womb to the world. Temperature changes, hunger, and over-stimulation to name a few, are all new sensations for them. Understanding normal newborn behaviors also helps. When we understand that it is normal for a baby to cry when laid down to sleep, we can help parents understand this and teach them realistic expectations and coping techniques, such as baby wearing.

This article explains some normal newborn behavior:

<http://sarahockwell-smith.com/2012/11/04/the-fourth-trimester-aka-why-your-newborn-baby-is-only-happy-in-your-arms/>

Tips for handling infant crying

- Is the baby hungry? Babies do not always follow the clock. Sometimes they are hungry even when they “should not” be.
- Is the baby hot? Cold?
- Is the baby content in your arms but not once laid down? If so, the baby is needing to feel secure. Try baby wearing, resting with the baby beside you, or if you need to put the baby to sleep, try a soothing rocking motion such as a swing or bouncy seat. Swaddling might help as well.
- Is the baby uncomfortable? Check for tight socks, strings, etc
- Is the diaper clean and dry? Is the diaper too tight? Does the baby need to be wiped more thoroughly?
- Is the baby over-stimulated? Try going into a dimly lit room with white noise. Try baby wearing so the baby can snuggle close to your body and sing softly or pat while saying “Shhhhh.”
- Is the baby bored? Try a walk outside, pace in the house, show different toys or pictures, chat or sing.
- Is the baby tired but unable to calm down? Try baby-lwearing, a ride in the car or stroller, a warm bath, and baby massage. Sometimes the sound of a vacuum cleaner can be soothing to a baby.
- Is there gas or stomach discomfort? Try a warm bath, the “football” or colic hold (baby’s stomach down, head in palm while laying over forearm - great hold for dad!), belly massage, upright for burping, or belly down on your lap while patting his back.
- Unsure what to do? Sometimes a little fresh air or a warm bath can cure the unknown cries. Skin-to-skin is also a frequent cure for all, regardless of how the baby is fed.
- If the baby is inconsolable and parents uneasy, it is best they reach out to a care provider to rule out any underlying concerns.

Understanding a Baby’s Cries

Priscilla Dunstan from <http://http://www.dunstanbaby.com> has been featured on several television programs, in news articles and online blogs for her deciphering of infant cries. She has studied the cries of thousands of babies around the world and found that there are similar sounds a baby makes, based on reflexes. Parents can purchase her DVDs to learn more about her belief in decoding infant cries. In her experience she believes the following noises have distinct meaning:

- “Neh” – meaning, “I’m hungry”
- “Owh” – meaning, “I’m tired”

- “Heh” – meaning, “I’m uncomfortable”
- “Eairh” – meaning, “I have lower gas”
- “Eh” – meaning, “I need to burp”

Dr. Harvey Karp, creator of *The Happiest Baby on The Block*, offers a variety of resources for parents. There is a DVD, a book and parent educators can become certified as *Happiest Baby on The Block* instructors. The basic premise of his method is the 5 S's:

- Swaddling
- Side/stomach position
- Swinging
- Shushing
- Sucking

Parents can find more details and video clips at <http://www.happiestbaby.com/> This method can work well for some babies but should be used in moderation and only after a healthy feeding pattern is established. Swaddling can restrict a newborn's ability to display hunger cues. For a breastfeeding mother, it restrains the arms. A baby needs to massage his mother's breast with his hands to stimulate more milk production.

Infant Soothing Techniques

All babies will find different things soothing, and even the same baby will find different things soothing at different times. Understanding different tricks allows you to have a full "toolbox" to pull from until you find what works. Discussing these techniques at prenatal visits can help prepare parents and modeling at postpartum visits can show parents how to soothe baby. The following are some tools that may help a fussy baby:

- Wearing your baby skin-to-skin and close to your heart with a baby wrap that provides a feeling of being hugged, and then walking with gentle to more vigorous bouncing movements while singing a song or simply saying “Shhhh,” and patting her on the back usually helps a fussy and crying baby to calm down. Most babies calm down with skin-to-skin contact.
- Breastfeeding
- Warm bath followed by infant massage – best with the baby in the Quiet Alert state. Bathing can also be a bonding experience for the family. Some parents are afraid they won't know what to do. Be sure everything for the bath is within arm's reach i.e. three washcloths, diapers, towels, clean outfit, any ointment for diaper rash. Having the new mother watch a video of bathing a newborn can help increase her confidence. Be sure not to get soap in the baby's eyes to avoid irritation there. If a baby boy has not been circumcised, remember not to retract the foreskin of his penis as this can cause tearing and scarring. After bath time is a good time and fun time to do baby exercises such as crossing the arms and legs, raising arms overhead, alternating knees up to chest, and massaging. [www.http://babycenter.com/2_how-to-give-your-newborn-a-bath_1486858.bc](http://www.babycenter.com/2_how-to-give-your-newborn-a-bath_1486858.bc)
- Finger in her mouth with clean hands and nail side down. Pacifiers should be discouraged as

they can interfere with breastfeeding, make the baby become dependent on it, increase the risk of middle ear infections, and lead to dental problems.

- White noise or "shhh" sounds and dim lights
- Stroller ride as the fresh air and movement is soothing.
- Car ride or vacuuming as the sound of the motor is familiar to what the baby heard in the womb i.e sound of blood moving through the vessels in the body
- Babywearing with the wrap tied firmly around the mother and baby
 - <http://www.babywearinginternational.org/what-is-babywearing/babywearing-resources/benefits-of-babywearing/>
 - <http://www.babyktan.co.nz/benefits>
 - <http://www.babywearinginternational.org/what-is-babywearing/babywearing-resources/>
- How to, types of carriers, etc
- Walk baby while over your shoulder
- Change of scenery
- Swaying or rocking
- Singing or music
- Sometimes after feeds, changed diapers, and even naps, babies seem to fuss for no reason. Rule out injury and illness and then it is often trial and error to soothe you baby. Just as adults have their moments, so do newborns. Remind parents that babies do not cry to manipulate and that it is simply their only way to communicate needs.
- Crying is a late form of communication. Hands by mouth, sucking, and fussing are signs of hunger. Yawning, rubbing eyes and fussing are signs of being tired, crying often means they are already over tired. Irritability, fussing, and restlessness can be a sign of over-stimulation.
- A newborn's nervous system is not developed enough to use the fight/flight response. Therefore a baby left to cry longer than about a minute, may not be able to stop easily. Leaving a newborn to cry for long periods of time can cause the release of stress hormones. Even if baby settles after a long stretch of crying it has been found their stress hormone levels remain elevated. While babies still cry when being held it does not have the same effect as being alone. Life may also require baby to wait, as when his mother cares for siblings or in the car, but verbal reassurance can be used and in time baby may accept this as temporary comfort until needs are met.

Application and Understanding

1. You are with a mother doing postpartum care one month after birth. She says she's confused about what is the right thing to do when her baby is crying. She says, "Some books I'm reading say you will spoil your baby if you pick her up every time she cries. Other books say you should pick your baby up every time she cries. What should I do?"
2. You are doing postpartum care with a baby who is crying. Describe three of the ways you could choose to soothe him.
3. What are the five S's and describe the reasons they are applicable to soothing a fussing and/or crying baby.
4. What is the reason that newborn sounds are similar cross culturally?