



# When the Baby Won't Stop Crying

When an infant cries, she is trying to tell you something. Usually it's easy to figure out what the baby is saying: "I'm hungry," "I'm wet," "I'm frightened." During the first months, an infant's primary needs are touch, eye contact, movement, smiles, nourishment and a close, caring relationship. Ideally, you read the baby's signals, meet her needs and she stops crying. When you respond quickly, the baby gradually learns that the world is a safe place and develops basic trust in herself and the world around her. She forms an attachment to you and a secure base from which to explore the world. Your sensitive, responsive interactions with the infant enhance brain development along with all her other early physical, emotional, intellectual and social development.

But sometimes, all your attempts to provide comfort don't work. The baby cries and cries and just won't be comforted. The longer the baby cries, the longer it takes to stop crying. You try everything that has worked before and become frustrated and find it difficult to feel positive and loving with the baby and her family.

## Why does an infant cry like this – and what can you do?

Keep in mind that crying is how a child tells you he needs something. It's up to you to use your physical touch, kind words, tender loving care and experience to soothe, comfort and help him adjust.

### Stay nearby and be as calm as possible

An inconsolable baby often feels great sadness and confusion at being separated from his mother or family and needs to express his feelings. Whether you are 2 years old or 42 years old, you will have a sense of loss when you are not able to be with the person you most want to be with. The baby needs to experience

the security of being with you. Hold him and stay nearby. Let him take as long as he needs to cry. Reassure other children and parents that you are aware of his feelings and that his needs are being met.

### Reassure the parents

Parents may be distressed by knowing that their baby cries when they aren't there. Ask what they do to comfort him at home and try to adopt some of the same techniques. Try sharing some of your positive experiences each time you talk with the parents, such as, "Serena gave me such a sweet smile when I was singing today," or "Jamil loved going outside and seeing the birds today."

### Try to understand and consider some other causes

- *Physical pain or health condition:* Is she eating, sleeping and developing well? Food allergies or a lack of sleep can cause unusual irritability. Colic, gas, diaper rash, ear infections, teething and other common childhood conditions can cause pain. Be sure a health care provider has evaluated the child recently.
- *Developmental stage:* The onset of stranger and separation anxiety can range from 6 to 18 months. At those times, infants are particularly sensitive to changes in care and may even have difficulty with familiar caregivers. They may act fussy and anxious around unfamiliar people or people who have different physical characteristics from their family. You can help by supporting a strong relationship with a primary caregiver who is always there to say hello and goodbye as well as maintain other routines such as feeding, diapering and napping.
- *Individual differences:* Children with "slow-to-warm" temperaments may take time to embrace

a new caregiver or adjust to being in child care. Consider the compatibility between the temperament of the child and her primary caregiver. Consider the individual child's sensitivity to noise, light or new things, and try to adjust the amount of stimulation in the environment to meet the child's needs. Give children plenty of time to adjust to changes in people and routines and allow for individual preferences.

### Learning self-comforting

Some children are ready to learn to take comfort in good-bye rituals, transitional objects such as blankets or stuffed toys, or other self-comforting skills. Providing the structure and security of a small group with a primary caregiver and regular routines and schedules will help these children.

### Unmet emotional needs

Infants are sensitive to stresses in the family, such as illness, changes in parents' work schedules or limited time and resources. They are tuned in to the moods and feelings of their parents. You may need to make a special effort to talk with the parents about how they are feeling and what is happening at home. Parents may worry and feel guilty about leaving their baby knowing she is crying for long periods of time. Reassure them by talking about what you do to comfort the baby and find out what works at home. If there is a favorite routine, music, toy or activity, you can ask the parent to help you replicate it. If the parent is able to spend some more time with you at the beginning and end of the day, the baby will sense the trust the parent has placed in you and begin to trust you too.

### Unrecognized special needs

Some infants lack a sense of attachment, basic trust and safety and become extremely demanding in response to their own fear. Children who have experienced a lack of care in their early life show high levels of stress hormones, which affect crucial ways in which their brains, bodies and relationships develop.

Factors that may contribute to impaired attachment include: premature birth, prenatal exposure to alcohol or other drugs, separation from the birth mother,

postpartum depression in the mother or other parenting difficulties, severe neglect or abuse, multiple caregivers, unresolved pain, hospitalizations or invasive medical procedures.

Fortunately, early intervention programs are available to provide evaluation and assessment for children who are at risk for disabilities, and to support the child's development through access to appropriate services as needed.

### Caregivers' emotional needs

Pay close attention to your emotional well-being and learn to recognize your own sensitivities and "hot spots." An infant who cries constantly can stress even the most experienced caregiver. Calm yourself and take a deep breath. If you have someone to help, let them try to comfort the baby; or put him down gently in a safe place and go into another part of the room for a few minutes to try to calm down. Try to avoid stressful situations during the time of day he usually fusses. Talk about it with a supportive person.

If it becomes more that you can stand, or if you feel like shaking or hitting or harming a child in any way, *call for help immediately*. Infants are fragile and can be hurt even when you don't mean to.

If you have concerns about a child's development, talk them over with the parents and seek professional help. For resources available for assessment of developmental concerns, call California's Early Start Program, 800-515-BABY, or the Child Care Healthline at 800-333-3212.

### Resources

*Learning and Growing Together: Understanding and Supporting Your Child's Development*. C. Lerner and A.L. Dombro. (2000). Zero to Three. (Also available in Spanish.)

*Learning and Growing Together Tip Sheets: Ideas for Professionals in Programs that Serve Young Children and Their Families*. C. Powers and C. Lerner. (2000). Zero to Three. rev. 06/04