

# UNDERSTANDING A BABY'S CRY: HOW TO SUPPORT CAREGIVERS



Babies cry. Anyone who has spent time caring for a baby knows this to be true. Crying is a major way that babies get their needs met. When trusted caregivers notice and respond to crying, it helps babies to understand the impact they have on their environment. Supporting caregivers whose babies cry a lot, however, can be difficult. Here are a few tips providers can use to help caregivers feel more understood, informed, and confident when dealing with a crying baby.

1

Validate how challenging it can be to tolerate and respond to crying. Tell caregivers that it is normal to feel frustrated, panicked, angry, sad, or confused about what to do when their baby is crying.

2

Provide realistic expectations. Let caregivers know that no one (caregiver or baby) is to blame if the baby cries frequently and that it is normal for babies to go through periods of increased crying.

3

Inform caregivers of factors that can increase crying. Help caregivers who care for babies with certain risk factors arrange for extra support.

4

Share practical tips that can help soothe a crying baby and prevent crying as well as strategies that can help caregivers stay calm when their baby cries.

5

Educate caregivers about common misconceptions regarding infant crying (e.g., that picking up a crying baby will spoil them).

***It's normal for caregivers to turn to child development professionals for reassurance and solutions. Meeting them with empathy, compassion, and providing simple, accessible tips can make a world of a difference.***



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# UNDERSTANDING A BABY'S CRY

Crying is normal and depends on the baby's age, as well as a few other things. Babies cry the most from about 3 to 8 weeks old, then crying slowly decreases until babies are around 3 to 4 months old. If your baby is crying for more than three hours per day, three days per week, it may be a good idea to check with their doctor about a possible medical reason, especially if the baby is older than three months.

Q

A

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**Why do I feel so upset when I hear my baby cry?**

A

Humans are biologically programmed to notice babies' crying. This is how babies have survived for thousands of years! It is good to recognize if you are someone who is especially sensitive to infant crying so you can plan for how you will calm yourself.

**Here are some suggestions:**

- If you have a co-caregiver, make a plan for handing the baby off when you feel overwhelmed by crying. Consider putting in earplugs or wearing headphones if the baby has been crying for a long time and you feel like you cannot stand it much longer. It's still important to be able to hear the baby and respond to them, but softening the sound may help you feel calmer.
- Think of a few things you can remind yourself of in hard moments, such as "The baby feels safe enough with me to cry," "Babies are supposed to cry," "The baby is having a hard time, not giving me a hard time," "I am doing the best I can," or "This crying won't last forever." Consider writing these reminders down, and place them where you can see them.
- Take care of yourself when you can. Eat regular meals and drink water. Limit consumption of alcohol or other substances, which can make your reactions to crying more exaggerated.
- Take small breaks to take deep breaths, notice other things in the environment, and check in with your body. Take a moment to observe your baby before reacting to their crying.
- Try making a point of noticing positive things about your baby when they are not crying like their smile, physical features, or how it feels to play and interact with them.

Q

**Will picking up a baby when they cry spoil them?**

A

No. You cannot spoil a young baby. Responding to a baby's crying helps them to feel safe and secure and teaches them to trust other people. Of course, it is not always possible to respond right away to crying, and it is always okay to take a break when you feel overwhelmed.

Q

**Are there things I can do to prevent my baby from crying as much?**

A

Infant crying is normal. Almost all babies will go through a period where they cry more than any other time in their lives. Although there are some things you can do to prevent or limit crying, there is nothing that will work all of the time. Being gentle with yourself is important.

- Pay attention to your baby's pattern. Consider ways you can adjust your schedule around predictable crying.
- Hold and carry your baby a lot, even when they are not fussy.
- Talk, sing, pat, and hug your baby when they are calm.

Q

**Why does my baby seem to cry more than other babies their age?**

A

Just like adults, babies have different personalities. Some babies are more sensitive to their environments and feel things more intensely, which can mean they cry more and require more attention. There are many positive things about having an intense temperament, and this quality is not a reflection of your parenting. But parents of higher-needs babies often struggle with sadness or guilt around their child's crying. If you are caring for a higher-needs baby, it is especially important that you get support - from professionals, other parents who have similar babies, and friends and family.



# WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY BABY WON'T STOP CRYING?

Check to see if something is physically wrong with them. Check their diaper and their temperature, offer milk or formula, and check to see if there is anything rubbing, pulling, or scratching them.



Then, try the 5 S's developed by pediatrician Harvey Karp:

- 1** Swaddle your baby.
- 2** Shush your baby with white noise or by making a shushing noise.
- 3** Place your baby on their side or stomach while holding or closely supervising them. Do not place a baby younger than 12 months to sleep on their belly unsupervised.
- 4** Gently swing or jiggle your baby from side to side. Never shake a baby. This movement should be done gently and should not be attempted if feeling angry or frustrated.
- 5** Give your baby a pacifier to suck on.

**In addition to the 5 S's many parents and pediatricians suggest the following strategies:**

- Put your baby in a baby carrier or sling and walk around.
- Take your baby for a drive.
- Give your baby a warm bath (while supervised).
- Give your baby skin-to-skin contact.
- Make eye contact with your baby and gently kiss or nuzzle them.
- Take your baby outside.

It is important to be aware of your own feelings while trying to calm a crying baby. Most parents will have moments when they feel angry and overwhelmed by their baby's crying. If you feel this way, it will be harder to soothe your baby and you may even risk hurting them. **It is always okay to put your baby down in a safe place for a few minutes, and walk away if you are overwhelmed.**

**National Parent Hotline**  
1-855-4A PARENT  
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