



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 the way babies get their needs met. Babies also quickly understand the impact on their environment when trusted caregivers notice crying and respond. Supporting caregivers whose babies cry a lot, can be difficult – especially if caregivers are temporary resource parents. 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 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 when 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.

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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.



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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.

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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.

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I am a resource parent/relative. A baby was placed with me temporarily. I'm worried that if I pick the baby up when they cry, they will become too attached to me and it will be difficult for them to go to another caregiver. What should I do?

A

It is always good for babies to form secure attachments to caregivers, even if those caregivers are temporary. Babies can form attachments to more than one person. Becoming attached to you does not mean the baby will not be able to bond with another caregiver later.



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 your baby 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.

*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 sooth 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 (1-855-427-2736)