

# Baby Basics: Handling the Crying Child<sup>1</sup>

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## Overview

What parent hasn't experienced this catastrophe? The baby cries, you check the diaper... it's dry. Maybe it's time for a feeding. No, she just ate 10 minutes ago. Is she too hot? Maybe you should take that blanket off of her. Still crying? Ok, maybe she's too cold. Try putting TWO blankets on her this time. Still no good? Do you feel like you want to give up? Do you want to join in and cry yourself?



Figure 1. Jupiterimages/Creatas/Thinkstock.com

Don't worry. You're not alone. Dealing with a crying baby is one of the universal challenges of parenthood, and it can provide some of the most frustrating moments that you'll ever experience.

## Crying is Healthy

It's important to realize that crying is a natural part of a child's development. In fact, it's one of the first things that doctors and nurses look for as a sign that a newborn is healthy and alert. Crying is a necessary and useful behavior for all infants. The main purpose of a baby's crying, believe it or not, is to talk to you. Crying is your baby's way of communicating pain, hunger, colic, boredom, discomfort, a soiled diaper, or over-stimulation.

Babies also cry to get rid of restless energy or release tension. It's natural for babies to cry, even when nothing is wrong, just to expend excess energy and begin to interact with their environment. This new, noisy, world can be overwhelming for a baby—especially when compared to the sights and sounds of mother's womb. For newborns, crying represents the first step toward using language to communicate.

## Learning the Meaning Behind Cries

Knowing the meaning behind your baby's cries isn't an easy task; it takes some time to get used to your baby's cries and to learn what they mean. Initially, all crying sounds the same, to even the most attentive parent, but after a few

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weeks of listening closely and responding to your newborn's cries, you'll begin to crack your infant's code and have an idea of what your baby is trying to tell you.

## BABIES CRY DIFFERENTLY

Not all babies cry the same. Furthermore, no two babies (including identical twins or triplets) are the same in terms of their temperament (those personality characteristics they are born with). Some babies just cry more than others.

For example, babies with colic can cry during most of their waking hours and often seem inconsolable. Some experts chalk up the problems of these “chronic criers” to a less-developed digestive system or an inborn tendency to overreact to stimulation.

Even if your baby doesn't initially seem like a “crier,” know that four out of five babies have daily crying spells that last from 15 minutes to an hour that don't seem easily explained. Particularly around three to 12 weeks of age, babies seem to cry in the early afternoon or evening, often just to let off steam or restless energy. The important thing to remember here is that the crying is part of a baby's natural development—which means that the crying won't last forever! Eventually, all babies outgrow their crying.

## What to Do When Your Baby Cries

The best way to handle most crying episodes is to respond quickly and try to meet baby's needs. Many parents are afraid that responding immediately to their infant's cries will spoil the child. This belief is a common mistake—and a big one! You are not going to spoil your baby by giving him or her attention. In fact, if you answer calls for help, your baby will probably cry less overall. Sometimes the longer a baby cries, the more upset he or she becomes, and the more difficult it becomes to calm the baby.

When your baby cries, first assess the situation and meet the most pressing need. For example, change the diaper, feed, burp, or change position of baby. Once the basic needs are covered, there are many ways to help calm your baby, most having to do with providing reassuring contact and a pleasant environment. Sometimes there's nothing more reassuring and nurturing than skin-to-skin contact and a relaxed environment. Try one or another of the following to calm your baby:

- Rocking a baby gently in your arms, while standing or sitting in a rocking chair
- Gently stroking baby's head
- Patting back or chest

- Wrapping baby snug in a blanket
- Singing or talking
- Playing soft music
- Walking (in arms, stroller, or carriage)
- Riding in car
- Burping to relieve gas
- Giving a warm bath
- Changing locations (from light to dark)
- Changing locations (from quiet to less quiet or vice-versa)

Here's another useful hint. Some babies like a constant low-pitched sound or vibration. Believe it or not, many parents swear that they can calm their baby by putting them in a secure car seat or baby carrier and placing them on top of a running clothes dryer. *Be careful, though. Never leave your child alone for a moment on top of a running clothes dryer.* The dryer's vibration can cause the baby seat/carrier to slide off and seriously injure your child. Running the vacuum cleaner is a popular strategy as well.

Hints such as the ones above help illustrate an important point about managing your child's crying. No one strategy works for all children. If you find something that works, stick with it. There's no need to experiment any further if you've found that “special trick” for your child.

## SOME SPECIAL TIPS FOR “CHRONIC CRIERS”

For constant criers, some pediatricians have suggested setting up a routine of letting the baby cry in a safe place, such as a crib, for 15 minutes, then picking up the child and soothing him or her for 15 minutes, and then putting him or her back down, and so on. This strategy may be particularly effective as your child transitions to sleeping in a crib, in another room, or through most of the night. During these times, your child may be especially prone to bouts of crying when nothing particularly seems to be wrong. Often they are simply bored, missing you, or are having some trouble getting comfortable with their new surroundings. By checking to make sure that everything is okay, but allowing your child to cry for a short time on his or her own before providing reassurance, you will allow him or her to begin the important task of learning to self-soothe.

## Dealing with Frustration

Even knowing that crying spells won't last forever, when your bundle of joy turns into a bundle of tears, it can bring tears to the eyes of any parent. Bouts of seemingly endless

crying, especially those that include high-pitched shrieks, test the nerves of any parent. You've checked the diaper. You've tried to feed. You've burped. You've rocked. Nothing seems to work. Most parents become frustrated and feel helpless, and some may even get mad at their child and want to shake them.

Even the best parents admit having some point where they were afraid they would lose control and shake or hurt their child. DON'T. Recognize that you need a break, even if it means putting your child in the crib and walking away for a few minutes. Take a few deep breaths to calm yourself. That's the better alternative.

**Another one?** If there's someone else available (a partner, neighbor, friend) ask him or her to help out for awhile while you regain your energy. Sometimes a fresh face and new pair of hands can do wonders, if not for the baby, at the very least for the parent. After a few minutes of self-prescribed rest and quiet a parent often feel less stressed and better able to handle the crying.

Most importantly, don't take your baby's crying personally. No parent can soothe his or her infant every time he or she cries, so don't expect that you can. Realize that it will also take time to figure out what your baby is trying to say to you, and that sometimes there isn't an apparent reason for the crying.

If you have a "chronic crier," accept it. Besides checking with your pediatrician to see if there is a medical reason for crying (e.g., colic or a needed change in diet), there is little you can do to change your baby's crying habits. Your tasks? Fight the urge to doubt yourself and fight the belief that you are doing something wrong.

You will need to develop some extra strategies to soothe yourself during these times, such as grabbing a fresh face and a new set of arms, taking a break, talking yourself through these episodes, and reminding yourself that all children need to cry and all children grow out of it. Talk to others about what you're experiencing. You're not the first parent who has had to deal with crying, and you won't be the last.

## Final Thoughts

Dealing with a crying baby is one of the great challenges facing you as a new parent. Don't worry, there will be many more ahead. However, it's important to recognize that a baby's cries have special meaning to you. Raising a child is a brand new experience filled with expectations and

anxiety. Remember that babies were given the ability to cry for a reason. Their moans, shrieks and howls are their first attempts to talk to you. Remember to stay calm in the face of their crying tantrums and remind yourself that crying is just a part of the healthy development of your child.

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