

Infant Mental Health: Comforting Your Baby



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Summary: Crying is a baby's way of expressing a need. As parents, our duty is to figure out what our child needs and meet that need. By consistently meeting our child's needs, a child will learn that the world can meet his/her needs, and will thus grow up healthy, secure and trusting of others. If we fail to meet our child's needs, a child learns that the world cannot meet his/her needs, leading to lack of trust, and all manner of future emotional and behaviour problems.

Introduction

Crying is the main way your baby can tell you what he or she needs. How you respond when your baby cries during the first year of life will teach your baby if he or she can count on you.

No one can comfort a baby ALL the time. What matters is that most of the time, you try to comfort him or her.

Three Very Important Times To Pay Attention To Your Baby's Cries

1. When your baby is sick
2. When your baby is hurt
3. When your baby is upset (for example, when he or she is sad, frightened or lonely)

Comforting your baby at these times does not spoil him or her. It makes your baby feel respected and loved. Knowing that you are there to help him or her feel better makes your baby feel safe. He or she needs to feel safe to play, to learn and to trust people.

Three Main Ways Parents Can Respond To Their Baby's Cries

Each way will give your baby a different message.

1. The parent tries to find out what is bothering the baby and helps the baby feel better by picking the baby up quickly and gently, and rocking and soothing the baby. This loving response makes the baby feel loved, safe and secure. The baby is likely to cry less, to calm down easily, and later get long well in school and with friends.
2. The parent ignores, teases or gets angry with the baby. This can make a baby learn to pretend that he or she is not upset when he or she needs comforting most. Later he or she may have problems behaving well, for example, being mean to others, cheating or lying

3. The parent responds a different way each time the baby cries – sometimes loving, sometimes angry, and sometimes the parent may get more upset than the baby and ask the baby to comfort them. It is not up to babies to meet our needs. It is up to us as parents to meet our babies' needs.

When parents are not consistent, their babies learn that they cannot depend on their mom or dad. The baby never knows what to expect and has to work hard to get their parent's attention. They may become clingy and demanding, or helpless and withdrawn. When these babies grow up, they are likely to have problems getting along with other children and adults.

It is not easy being the parent of a new baby. Often you are tired and have too much to do. That makes it hard to be patient when your baby cries. Some babies cry a lot and may be hard to comfort. This may make you feel helpless and upset. That is normal. However, your baby really needs you to be calm, soothing and comforting to help him or her feel better. When you cannot comfort your baby calmly, take a break and get someone to help you. All parents need someone to help them at times.

Your baby's cry is not a habit to break. It is a message that he or she needs you and that you should respond with warmth and love.

If your baby feels you love him or her, your baby will feel good about himself or herself. Later on your baby will then learn to care about other people.

Try some of these things

- Pay attention to your baby. Look at your baby's eyes and face.
- Try to imagine what your baby may be thinking and feeling.
- Hold your baby close and talk quietly and calmly.
- Let your baby know that he or she can depend on you.

Responding now in ways that show your baby that he or she can depend on you will give your baby the simple gift of confidence. That gift will make a huge difference to your baby for the rest of his or her life.

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For More Information

Information from this article is excerpted from the video, "A Simple Gift: Comforting Your Baby". This program provides specific information about the development and importance of the infant's attachment relationship with parents in the first year of life, and shows how parents can respond so that their children learn to develop securely. Suitable for parents from many cultures and backgrounds.

Video available from Infant Mental Health Promotion (IMP), c/o The Hospital for Sick Children, 555 University Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1X8, Phone (416) 813-7654 x 1082, Fax (416) 813-2258, imp.mail@sickkids.ca, <http://www.sickkids.ca/imp>

Disclaimer

This information is general advice only. If your relationship with your child is becoming very difficult or upsetting, or your child's behaviour is becoming very difficult to deal with, you need more advice. You might talk to your doctor or a public health nurse or call the children's mental health centre close to where you live.