

Creating a Network of People Who Work with Infants and Toddlers

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



Crying

Many infant caregivers list dealing with children's crying as one of their greatest challenges. Listening to a baby cry is one of the most distressing things for adults. There is instinct at work here. We are programmed to try to stop the crying. Thus the species has survived! When it is not possible to stop a baby's crying, or when several of them are crying at once, our stress builds.

Young babies cry because of discomfort, usually hunger or gastric pain. There may be other discomfort, such as from urine irritation of a wet diaper or illness. So it is a physical calling out that something is wrong . . . please fix it.

When adults respond promptly, and with the appropriate comfort, to a young baby's cries, he learns "basic trust" — that someone is out there to comfort and care for him. While some people may hesitate to "spoil" babies by picking them up when they cry and otherwise comforting them, there has been research that shows that when young babies are comforted promptly they are

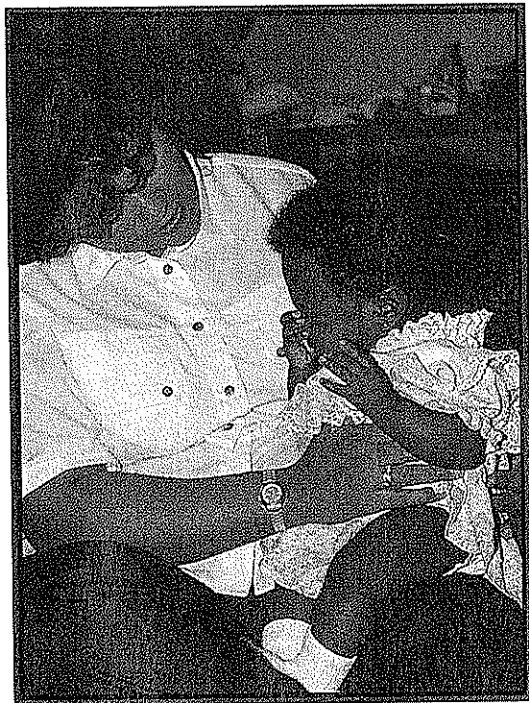
more patient and compliant later on and can put off immediate gratification a little longer.

Try to figure out why the baby is crying and respond appropriately. You will gradually learn to differentiate the different cries of each infant in your care.

Talk to the baby. Although it may seem silly, talking to the baby about her crying is in itself comforting. Go over to the baby and let her see your face. Say something like, "Oh, Sadie . . . I hear you are crying. Something is making you uncomfortable. I wonder what it is. Let's see . . . you were just fed, so I don't think you are hungry. No . . . your diaper is

not wet. Maybe you want to be in a different position. I will put you on your side and see if that helps."

Infants also seem to cry just to exercise their lungs, experiencing a fussy period at certain times of day . . . often right



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before dinner as soon as the stressed parent arrives at home and has a million things to do! Some babies are quite "regular" in their "fussy" times and you can predict them. Others are more difficult to predict. Some infants need to cry before they go to sleep. Some wake up with a cry. Talk to the parents to get insight into the different crying patterns of each particular baby. Also get clues from parents of how their child is best comforted.

As infants develop, they learn to use crying as a cause and effect tool. It's what they do to make the magic face appear. Toward the middle of the first year, it becomes a social "doorbell." It is certainly behind the cry of anger or frustration . . . "Someone get over here and help me get what I want!" In that sense, it is a cognitive development as well as a language development.

Remember that crying is a baby's first communication. It's important to acknowledge that babies have a *right* to cry. While we should respond to an infant's cries and try to figure out if we can alleviate the discomfort that is causing the cry, we must avoid the tendency to stop the crying at all costs. Renowned infant specialist Magna Gerber cautions that it should not be our primary goal to stop a baby from crying. By always stopping the crying, we communicate that it is not okay to have a full range of feelings. (But don't stand there like a zombie when you know and can relieve the cause.) Many people automatically "plug in" a baby when she cries, by feeding her or putting something like a pacifier in her mouth. (This may be the root cause of overeating to relieve emotional stress in adulthood.) Others lull the child into an altered state of consciousness by placing him in a wind-up swing, which can be quite habit forming for a child.

When older infants cry at separation, there is grief, fear, and anger all at once. As you comfort the child, acknowledge what she is feeling, don't discount it. Instead of automatically saying, "You'll be fine," and trying to distract the child, say, "Yes . . . it's hard to be away from Mommy. I'm here to take good care of you and be with you until she comes back." (Even if the child doesn't exactly understand your words, the comforting message will be communicated.) Let the child cling to you, and sit quietly holding the child until she climbs out of your lap on her own, ready to take in what the day has to offer her. Other children learn from this as well, and you may even see an empathetic response from another child who may bring over a blanket or otherwise try to comfort the child. They learn this by example.

Remember the empathetic response. Even when several children are crying at once and you are busy and cannot attend to them, you can acknowledge their distress and begin to comfort them with your voice. You can even apologize! "Yes, Michael . . . I hear you. You are hungry. I'm sorry I cannot help you right this second but as soon as I finish with Katie I will come over and help you."

Do remember that infants do not cry to bother adults. When you are appropriately responsive to the different reasons for crying, either by picking the baby up, feeding the baby, changing a diaper, moving the baby, putting the baby to bed, or otherwise comforting the child, you teach the child that she *matters*. Infants learn that they can communicate and somebody out there cares...a very basic emotional message.

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