

Skill-Building Opportunities

Constant Crying

Question: My baby loves to be held and won't stop crying if I put him down. What can I do to help him stay calm, even when I'm not holding him?

No doubt about it: a crying baby can be stressful. But remember that crying is one of your baby's earliest ways of communicating with you. In fact, he is learning about his own ability to communicate through your responses to his cries. There are many ways to deal with your baby's constant crying and at the same time, help build a strong foundation for the life skill of Communicating, even before your baby can talk. These also will help your child learn to communicate with words later on.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing. It is the skill of determining what you want to communicate and realizing how communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

1

Observe your child.

Your baby uses crying in several ways: to get help when hungry or uncomfortable, to release tension and to shut out sensations that are too much, like loud noises or bright lights. Be a detective to figure out what your baby is trying to tell you:

- Can you tell the difference among your baby's cries?
- Does he have one kind of cry when he is hungry, a different one when he is upset and a different one when he seems uncomfortable?
- Is there a physical reason for this crying? Does he have colic or a sensitivity to too much stimulation?

Once you begin to understand the reasons behind your baby's cries, you can learn what to do.

2

Respond to your baby's cues.

If you think there may be a physical reason that affects his crying, check with your doctor, who can advise you on how to respond. If not, know that crying is the main way for your son to communicate with you.

Once you have learned the difference in your baby's cries, you can respond by feeding him if he is hungry or by trying to get him to sleep if he is tired. If you find that your child is very sensitive to stimulation, then try to create an environment that is as soothing as possible.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the best way to handle crying is to respond promptly to your infant's cries in the early months. You cannot spoil a young baby by giving him attention. If you answer his calls for help, he will learn that there are people who are there to help him and he will eventually cry less.

Part of playing detective is paying attention to what YOU do that works best in calming your son. Keep doing what works! When you respond sensitively to what your child is trying to tell you with his behavior, you show him that what he has to say is important, even though he is communicating to you with cries, not words..

- **Think of yourself as a sportscaster and describe what your baby is doing.** Say things like: “You don’t like that I’m changing your diaper. The wipes are cold and you are sleepy.” This helps your baby feel understood and cared for, while he develops connections between his feelings and actions, an important part of helping him manage and of developing the skill of Communicating.
- **If you are unable to hold your baby, assure him that you are still there for him by using your voice to reassure him.** Sing songs, make silly faces and talk to him. Say things like: “I have to take a hot pan out of the oven. I will pick you up when I am all done.”

These actions will help your child eventually use words as a way of expressing himself later on. Children can understand words long before they can use them.

3

Build on your child’s strengths.

Very young children can learn to manage stress on their own when they are supported by adults who build on the coping strategies they already have. Look for the techniques YOUR CHILD already uses to help himself calm down and help him use these techniques when he is upset. Ask yourself:

- Does he have a favorite toy, object or piece of clothing that seems to settle him down?
- Does my child like to be wrapped snugly or worn in a carrier?
- Does he quiet when he hears singing, talking or soft music?
- Does my baby like rhythmic sounds, like humming or shushing?

As your baby gets older, he will gain more control over his feelings and actions. You are helping him learn to use that control by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

4

Think about how you respond to your baby and get help when you can.

It is not just what you say to your baby that matters, but how you say it. Your baby pays close attention to the feelings you express on your face and with your tone of voice.

If you are understandably feeling worn out by his constant crying, get help so you can to give yourself a break and time to regroup. You will respond more positively to his crying when you are feeling cared for, too!