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Crying & Sleeping in the First Months of Life

Crying and sleeping problems are two of the most common difficulties for parents of babies under one. Nearly all parents will experience difficulties with their baby's crying or and interrupted sleep in the early months.

It can be hard to know what to do but it can help to try to imagine the world from your baby's point of view. In the womb they were in a world of their own, made especially for them. In being born they have already made the most dangerous journey of their life, and now they have to become used to a world full of strange encounters and new feelings. In the midst of all this your baby is becoming used to those who care for him and building the foundations for a more predictable world. But this will take time.

It will also take time for you, as a parent, to get to know your baby and – along with the excitement – to recover from the shock and tiredness of the birth and to adjust to the changes in your life from becoming responsible for a new baby.



What babies need

All babies are alike in needing food, sleep, warmth and loving attention, but all babies are also different. Some are very tranquil and seem to fit easily into family life, but most babies have some difficulty settling into their new world. When they are full, cuddled and loved they may feel peaceful. But when they feel wet, hungry, alone – or just miserable and out of sorts– all they can do is cry and thrash about. As parents we want them to settle into a rhythm we can cope with but along the way this emerges out of living through a good deal of uncertainty and anxiety that make us feel frustrated and helpless.

Yet babies don't ask for more than they need. If their demands seem overwhelming, it's not because they are 'trying it on' or are getting spoiled. A baby can't understand anyone else's point of view or consider anyone else's feelings; even a toddler is only just beginning to get some idea about these things.

A baby who comes through their first year feeling loved and understood is more likely to develop into a toddler who feels confident that a parent will come if they really need them. A child who has this confidence is less likely to fret if that attention isn't instantly available. This provides the best basis for learning about waiting and sharing.

Why babies cry

Some parents say 'Why does my baby cry so much? Some days everything I do seems wrong!'

Crying is your baby's way of showing you their feelings. Sometimes they want food (or just to suck for comfort), sometimes they want you to cuddle and talk to them – but often they are just out of sorts with themselves and the world. There may be a pattern to their crying (possibly during the early evening) but often there is not. A baby is too young to have any way of helping themselves or of telling you what is troubling them. So, all you can do is to be a sympathetic companion by trying to bear with the crying because your baby needs your comfort and reassurance. It This may be easier said than done because a baby's crying is specially designed to make you feel something of their distress and panic. This is nature helping us to see the world from the baby's point of view – but it also makes it very hard to cope with a constantly grizzling or distraught baby.

You may find that nothing seems to work for long and it's a rare baby who is never left to cry for a little while from time to time. After all, it's your survival your baby needs most. So, your baby needs you to look after yourself and to get as much practical help and emotional support as you can from your partner, your friends or your family. You may even be lucky enough to have someone who will look after the baby for an hour or two while you have a break.

Helping your baby to settle down

People will remember what helped with their babies but try not to get pulled in opposite directions by following too many pieces of advice.

Unfortunately, there aren't many easy answers. You are the only one who is close enough to begin to understand your baby and to sort out what practical measures might help and be manageable within your own family.

Trying to see the world from your baby's point of view is a good start. All babies are different.

- Some babies like to be quiet and still and are easily startled and upset by too much going on; other babies are more content if they feel there's a bit of life going on around them.
- Feeding or sucking work like magic for some babies; others find feeding a bit of a fraught time.
- Some babies can go easily from being cuddled to being put down; others seem to think this is the end of the world.

If your baby cries excessively and you simply can't settle them, check with your health visitor or doctor to make sure that there is nothing physically wrong.

If they reassure you that nothing is wrong, try not to feel that your baby must be 'crying for nothing', or that they are a 'bad baby', or that you have failed as a parent. It is an exhausting but common problem that will almost certainly settle in time. Try not to be embarrassed by your baby's crying and so become isolated.

Sleeping through the night

It can be very hard when someone asks you 'Is your baby sleeping through the night yet?' Especially if their baby is!

Try not to compare your baby with anyone else. It's not a race. It's bad enough being tired, but it's even worse if you feel that not 'sleeping through' is unusual or a sign that something is terribly wrong with your baby or with you.

Babies do not know the difference between night and day at first. During the first three or four months their digestive systems make it difficult for them to go for even six hours at night without a feed. This is even truer for breastfed babies. Most babies under six months old wake up regularly during what an adult would think of as night-time and many parents have broken nights for much longer.

But babies don't only wake because of hunger. They are at the very beginning of their lives and are extremely emotionally dependent on those who care for them. As your baby grows, they learn from experience that you are there when they need you. By giving them this confidence, you help them to begin to settle themselves or to entertain themselves for a bit when they are awake.

Helping your baby to sleep

If your baby still doesn't seem able to relax and let go of you at night, it's worth thinking about their day. Has it been too stimulating? Has it been so busy or stressful that they haven't had enough peaceful time with you?

Some babies are very self-contained and independent during the day and only seem to realise that they need you at night. It's worth trying to encourage babies like this to enjoy more of your company during the day rather than taking advantage of their independence to get on with other things.

These practical tips might be helpful:

- Try to make sleep-time very peaceful with a familiar pattern to it.
- Allow time for your baby to settle themselves even if they are whimpering, but don't leave a distressed baby to scream if they can't settle or if they have been asleep and have woken up again.
- Talk to the baby very quietly and try to keep a quiet, sleepy atmosphere at night so they learn that this is different from daytime.
- Try to get as much rest as possible whenever the baby is asleep.
- Make the most of any opportunities to enjoy them when they're happy. Memories of those moments will see you through the bad times!

Helping you to cope

Babies sense your feelings. The best thing for you and your baby is to concentrate on getting to know one another. Giving too much attention to trying to find answers to each problem may be a real barrier to getting to know your baby.

You may try to establish a routine to help you get through the day, but any routine needs to be flexible and realistic and to change as your baby grows. Even establishing routines won't transform your baby's temperament or enable you to have all the answers.

If you or the family are going through a worrying or unhappy time, it may well unsettle your baby so that just when you need a bit more peace, they become miserable and wakeful. It's difficult to protect a baby from family worries but perhaps the problems are ones you could seek help with.

Some people feel low after having a baby. All sorts of feelings and demands which they might ordinarily have managed can overwhelm them. So, if your baby seems really inconsolable, perhaps they are sensing your unhappiness.

Many people feel lonely and isolated with a new baby and it can be particularly stressful if you are a single parent. Try to make the effort to meet other parents regularly.

During bad patches, you can easily feel that everyone – including your own baby – is criticising you. Sometimes a baby is born following a period of particular sadness, such as the death of a parent, a previous miscarriage, stillbirth or cot death. In these circumstances it may be very difficult

for parents to cope with their baby's distress about being put down for the night.

Asking for help

Most parents worry because they aren't always as loving and patient as they would like to be. It can be a shock for any parent to discover how resentful they sometimes feel towards their own babies.

Parents sometimes say, 'I get so tired and on edge that I worry I may harm my baby'. If you feel that caring for your baby is so overwhelming that you are frequently angry, you may need help.

Accept as much help as you can get. You have no need to think that people will interfere and criticise you for asking for help.

Help might consist of practical assistance and support. It may be a matter of helping parents to think about their children for themselves by trying to understand the worries and unhappiness that can get in the way.

For most people, being a parent is the most rewarding job they will ever do. But it is also the hardest, so you deserve all the support you can get.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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