

Understanding Why Babies Cry

Crying is the way in which a baby communicates his distress. In the absence of understandable verbal communication skills, it is a baby's most important signalling system.

Crying is a baby's genuine request for help, and not a baby's way of manipulating his parents to give him undue attention. Crying is designed to create a response, the main function being to bring the parent close to the baby so that the situation can be assessed and the baby comforted. The uneasy feeling it causes in a parent is for a reason; so that they feel the need to respond to the baby's cry and not to ignore it.

How, as adults, do we feel when we are ignored? Isolated, alone, our needs and thoughts unheard. We can react in two ways, make ourselves heard by talking louder, or rephrasing until we are acknowledged; or when, after repeated attempts, we are still ignored we withdraw from the situation, but feel dejected. Babies react in the same way, if ignored they cry louder, if continually ignored they eventually withdraw into themselves and do not try to communicate their helpless state and eventually lower their expectations of care.

It is not easy to identify a baby's different types of crying in their early infancy, but with practise and experience parents do learn. Learning happens each time a parent reacts to their baby's cry and observes the baby's response.

Morris (Anthropologist, 1991) argues that there are seven main causes of crying: Pain, Discomfort, Hunger, Loneliness, Over-stimulation, Under-stimulation and Frustration.

Pain

If we as adults hurt ourselves we may be very verbal in our reaction, but it is rare that we resort to crying. A baby is quick to cry with any pain and there is a good reason why. A baby cannot assess how badly it is hurt, it cannot distinguish between a small bruise or a more serious injury. In order to protect himself, a baby cries so as to bring the parent to him so that the cause of pain can be assessed and the appropriate action taken. A baby's cry of pain is hard to ignore because it tends to be loud, sharp and intense: a baby with colic is a good example.

Discomfort

If a baby is uncomfortable, wet or dirty he may cry to signal this. The cry is milder and lacks the sharpness of the pain cry but is designed so as not to be ignored.

Hunger

If a baby is hungry his crying will only cease when he is offered food. If a baby has been left to cry for sometime and has worked himself up into a highly emotional state he may need to be calmed before he will accept his food. It is important to remember that when a baby experiences the feeling of hunger it happens quickly. It is a sensation that can distress a baby, Family Psychotherapist, Michael Folkes once likened it to the feeling of "having a pack of ravenous wolves in your stomach". A baby has no way of assessing time and so what a parent may see as over frequent feeding, a baby can only measure the time as a feeling that to them is the difference between starvation and survival.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a crucial factor in many instances of crying, especially in those cases where the

more obvious causes such as hunger are absent. If a baby feels isolated from his parents he may cry until he is in close physical contact with them again. Being alone too much can make a baby feel insecure, the repeated need for close physical contact may be inconvenient for many busy parents, but the fact is that a baby's need for close proximity to his protectors is something that has been programmed into a baby's instincts during the course of evolution. A parent is a baby's window to the world and nature has designed the baby-parent relationship to give the baby a communication link with his environment. When this relationship is nurtured a basic trust is formed which enables the baby to experience his world with security and confidence.

Over stimulation

Too much light, sound or activity can make a baby cry. Over stimulation is a form of sensory pain where a baby's eyes or ears or general nervous system are suffering from too much input. Over powering smells can also trigger a reaction. The situations that we as adults have become conditioned to tolerate can be too much for a baby. As able adults we can remove ourselves from an intolerable situation, a baby cannot.

Under stimulation

Boredom can become a problem with older babies in the second six months of babyhood. Much crying during this stage maybe from boredom, it is important to vary the elements in a baby's environment by giving him access to colours, shapes and textures in order to stimulate the senses.

Frustration

This can be a problem with older babies who find their clumsiness or lack of mobility a barrier to fulfilling their ambitions. If they attempt to achieve something and fail, they may start to cry as a way of obtaining parental assistance, in the simple but hugely significant task they set



upon themselves. Very often a baby will cry with frustration until he masters a new skill such as crawling and walking.

Crying can cause parents distress if they feel unable to identify the cause of their baby's call for help. If nothing seems to stop the baby crying a parent may become so tense that this adult tension and anguish can be felt by the baby and so a vicious circle develops, with the

parent suffering as well as their baby. An agitated, irritated and impatient parent does not always realise how insecure and anxious their baby will become from feeling their parent's mood via the parent's body language. Babies are very sensitive to sharp, jerky movements and quickly interpret them as signals of insecurity. These signals only amplify the baby's feeling of anxiety and the crying increases instead of decreasing. The task is for the parent to become more relaxed, which is not easy, but if achieved can work wonders. If a parent could only try to feel how their baby might be feeling, observe and react in a truly "altruistic" way, then it may be easier to react to their baby's crying in a more serene way. So very often a parent feels that it is a failing on their part if they have a crying baby in the first place. This is not so, as stressed earlier, crying is a form of communication that needs to be answered. Parents can only fail in facilitating their babies communication skills if they do not respond to their babies' signals for help in a sensitive way.

Responding in a sensitive way does not always mean having to pick a baby up to offer comfort. It is acknowledging the baby's cry and taking appropriate action. One of the states that Morris does not mention is tiredness. Many babies cry just before they are due to go to sleep and on waking again. When a baby cries before sleep it is because sleep is a form of separation from his environment and he does not want to give in to it, it is also because he is so tired he is releasing his accumulated tension and is feeling uncomfortable. A baby's sleep cry is to inform us of the fact that he needs to be helped to go to sleep. This does not necessarily mean that he wants to be cuddled to sleep, it may be that he wants to be placed in a comfortable position with his favourite cuddly. Some babies prefer to be left alone to go to sleep but like to know that the parent is around.

In our society we need to embrace crying rather than try to ignore it. If a parent can learn to stay calm and take a moment to observe a baby's body language as well as his cries, a lot can be learned. A baby whose cries for help are consistently met in a sensitive way will learn to cry less as he will learn to trust that his parents understand him.