

Parenting **3** Series

Baby's crying



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Department of Health

Crying is baby's instinct. New parents may feel stressful when hear their baby cry, 'Why does she cry? Is she hungry or feeling unwell?'. They may be at a loss to look for ways to soothe the baby.

Why do babies cry?

During the first few months after birth, a baby expresses his needs through crying. He may cry to indicate:

- his physical needs
- his discomfort due to excessive external stimulation
- feeling bored and needs for company
- he is feeling unwell



How to distinguish the cries of a baby?

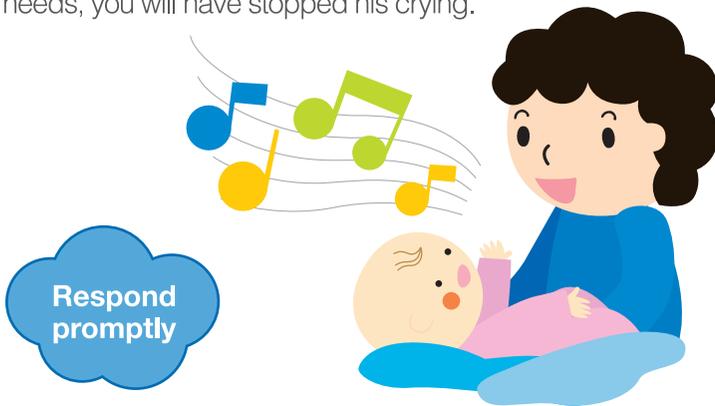
Each baby is unique and requires your patience to understand his different responses. If you can observe sensitively and respond promptly to his cries, you may gradually learn to differentiate his cries and the needs behind. For example, a hungry cry is usually low-pitched while an angry cry tends to be more violent.

Crying is one of the late cues among different signals babies used to express their needs, and it can be difficult for caregivers to identify what they need at the moment. Caregivers can look out the signs of distressed before cries (e.g. frowning, flattened

mouth, making fussy cries, jerking movements of body / limbs, etc). After spending some time with your baby, you will be better in understanding his needs and respond promptly.

How to console a crying baby?

When your baby cries, try to figure out why he cries and respond promptly. Let your baby see your face and hear your gentle voice as you go about checking out his needs. You may check whether there is a specific reason - his diaper is wet and need to be changed; he is hungry and need to be fed early this time; wearing too many outfits making him feeling hot. You may even consider other possibilities like whether his feet are being entangled or that he has been stung by a mosquito. By identifying and meeting his needs, you will have stopped his crying.



If your baby's crying is not due to the above reasons, he probably needs more soothing. You may try some of the suggestions below:

- Caress him and talk to him gently.
- Play some soft music.
- Swaddle him in a soft blanket to give him comfort and security.
- Rock him gently or walk around in a steady rhythmic motion while you are holding him. Hold him upright and close to your body, or lay him on your shoulder and chest.

- Satisfying his need for sucking. You may consider giving your baby a pacifier. If you nurse your baby with breastmilk, you can try to breastfeed him while you are in a lying position and let him suckle until he settles himself. In this way, you can also have a rest. Offering a pacifier too early to breastfed babies may affect them to master effective suckling on the breast. If it is needed, consider giving it to your breastfed baby only after effective breastfeeding is established.

Will I spoil my baby by holding him too much?

Many caregivers worry that holding their baby too much will spoil him and make him become clingy. Baby cries out of needs to be fulfilled. If you pick him up and soothe him, **you will not spoil him** but help him feel your care and love, which facilitates his **feeling of security** towards you. Responsive care also support his emotional development and your bonding with him.

When your baby is calm and alert, you may **attend to him** by talking, singing to him, cuddling, stroking or rocking him gently, etc. You may also play music to him, play with him or show him interesting things. This makes your baby feel contented, and learn that he will get this comfortable feeling and can enjoy communication with you when he is calm.

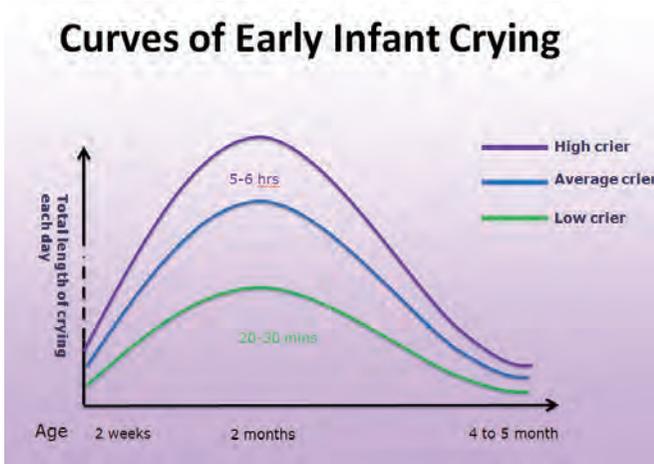


What to do if the baby is inconsolable?

A. Why babies cry non-stop?

Babies cry more and more in the first few months since birth. Some may cry inconsolably and parents find difficulty to soothe them. This is a normal developmental course. As babies gradually adapt to the external world and learn to communicate their needs through more sounds and gestures, they will cry less. Babies' crying duration and pattern vary given different temperamental characteristics and individual pace in development.

Curves of Early Infant Crying



Barr, R. G. (n.d.). Why does my baby cry so much? The Period of Purple Crying. Retrieved from <http://purplecrying.info/sub-pages/crying/why-does-my-baby-cry-so-much.php>



Some babies have intense daily bouts of crying at about the same time (usually in the evening). They cry with frowned facial expression, open their mouths wide, scream or passing gas with no apparent reasons; they may pull up their legs with jerky body movements. Though they appear to be in pain without obvious reasons, most of them are healthy babies. This is commonly known as “colic”.

Besides, baby when young can feel the emotional changes in the caregiver. He may become distressed and cry a lot under the influence of the caregiver's tensions.

When baby is sick, she may cry inconsolably regardless of your soothing.

B. Tips for managing the inconsolable baby

1. Be Calm

Keep calm and avoid being too worried and hurried. Doing too many things at the same time to the baby would only over-stimulate her and make her feel even more tense and uncomfortable.

2. Rule out the possibility of a medical condition

Observe your baby. If your inconsolable baby screams as well as refuses to suck, has a swollen tummy, with pale face or vomits, or shows no gain in body weight, these can be signs of illness and you should consult the doctor immediately.

3. Be systematic

Try one method at a time. Note his reaction and progress (e.g. the duration of the cry) that follows. Calm and systematic responses help you identify effective ways to manage your baby's crying.

4. Getting to know your baby's characteristics

Understanding your baby's individual response style and degree of sensitivity to environmental stimuli helps you take action earlier to prevent her from escalating to intense crying. Introduce the stimuli or changes gradually. Be sensitive to your baby's responses. Remove her from the stress situation and let her take a rest when she starts being fussy.



5. **Sharing experiences with other parents**

Talk with other parents or friends to learn about what they do. You may find some of the methods they have tried, such as taking the baby for a ride, going for a stroll or giving her a massage, to be feasible for you.

6. Putting things into perspective **with a peace of mind**

For babies who cry persistently, there is still no well documented ways in managing their crying. Fortunately, such intense daily bouts of crying will subside when the baby is about few months old, and as caregivers understanding the babies' needs and respond promptly. When finding effective ways to handle persistent crying, caregivers may try to be patient and accept that this is the way the baby is.



7. **Taking care of your own emotional needs**

If you have tried everything but the crying persists, your emotions will inevitably become tense. Some caregivers may have difficulty to control themselves and may hurt the baby (see Appendix: Abusive head trauma). When you feel agitated, give yourself some space to calm down immediately. E.g. if possible, leave your baby with a trusted friend or relative for a while. If you can't find a friend or relative to look after your baby for a while, put him in a safe place (such as a cot), ignore his cries for a while, regulate your mood, check in again at times to make sure he's safe and well, and then go back to take care of him when your mood becomes calm.

Both the wellbeing of you and your baby are equally important. Try not to put aside your own needs but keep effective communication with your family members. Consult healthcare professionals if your mood and/or your daily life has been affected.

Appendix: "Abusive Head Trauma" (previously known as "Shaken Baby Syndrome")

Abusive Head Trauma (previously known as Shaken Baby Syndrome) describes the serious injuries that can occur when infants or young children are violently shaken or suffer from blunt impact related to forceful hitting, slamming, pulling, etc. There is a gap between human brain tissue and the skull such that they are not tightly attached together. Babies are especially vulnerable because of the softness of the brain and lack of development of muscles in the neck. Violent shaking a baby as brief as a few seconds with rapid acceleration –deceleration forces, or subject them to blunt force would both cause damage to his fragile brain, resulting in serious injuries such as permanent brain damage, blindness, seizure or even death. It may occurs when a caregiver reacts impulsively out of anger or frustration to stop the baby from crying. Abusive Head Trauma is a serious form of child abuse. So, never handle a baby forcefully! Under usual care or play like bouncing a baby on knee, tossing him in the air would not cause Abusive Head Trauma.

Scan the QR code to find out more

How Postpartum Mothers
Cope with Stress?



Understanding Baby Cues



Family Health Service

Website: www.fhs.gov.hk

24-hour Information Hotline: 2112 9900