

Understanding Baby Cues



Department of Health

“My baby tells me her needs by crying before she can talk!” Many people think that crying is the only communication means babies use. In fact, babies do express needs or wants through different cues since birth, including gestures, movements, facial expression and sounds. Being sensitive to their cues and respond promptly and appropriately make parenting easier. It helps build up trust and bonding between you and your baby. More than that, it also helps facilitate your baby’s brain development which is crucial for learning.



Babies tell you what they want using these common cues:



I am Hungry/Full



I am Tired / Sleepy



I am Ready to Play



I am Distressed

Babies convey their needs by using multiple signals together. You know the need of your baby not from a single signal but by observing all the signals together. Your baby will have early signs to indicate his needs. When his needs are not met promptly, he will show more late signs of distress. An example is given for hunger and fullness below.

1

I am
Hungry/
Full!

Baby knows when he is hungry or full. Yet, we often think that they are hungry only when they cry or we may overlook their fullness cues. Let us take a look at how your baby tells you “I’m hungry” and “I’m full”!

“I am Hungry”

Below 6 months old

- Wakes up and moves
- Licks the lips
- Turns his head to search with mouth open
- Sucks his hand or fist



6 months or older

- Looks at food with interest
- Moves the head closer to the food and spoon
- Leans towards the food

"I'm Full"



Below 6 months old

- Slows down or stops sucking
- Closes her mouth
- Lets go the teat
- Relaxes her body and goes to sleep
- Arches her back and turns head away
- Pushes away the feeding bottle



6 months or older



- Not so interested to eat
- Eats more and more slowly
- Purse his lips
- Spits out food
- Turns his head away
- Arches his back
- Pushes away or throws the spoon and food

TIPS



1. Notice your baby's hunger cues to feed him and stop feeding when he shows cues of fullness. This allows him to learn regulating how much he eats according to his appetite. Feeding then becomes easy.
2. Start looking for these hunger cues every 1-2 hours in newborns or every 3-4 hours for an older baby. This allows a better way to work out when to feed than waiting for a set time.
3. If these early cues are not recognized, baby may show some late cues of distress like agitated body movements and crying. He needs you to calm him down before he can get back to eat.

2

**I am
Ready
to Play!**

As your baby advances in age and abilities, cues of ready to play will change. For example:

NEWBORN

- Looking at your face in front of him
- Looking into your eyes



2 MONTHS OLD



- Being excited when looking at objects or human faces
- Turning her head to you
- Cooing and repeating sounds like ooh-ooh-ooh, ah-ah-ah

AFTER 4 MONTHS

Besides turning her head to you and babbles, she may reach out to you



AFTER 6 MONTHS



Using multiple signals to convey her needs, e.g., looking and smiling at you, babbling and opening her arms for your attention

TIPS



1. It is the best time to play or interact with your baby when you notice the above cues. You may face her, look into her eyes, use exaggerated facial expressions, encourage her to imitate your expression and talk and sing to her.
2. While playing with your child, remember to wait and observe her expressions and behaviours before you respond. This helps you to closely follow your child's needs.

To know more about the skills of parent-child interaction, please watch our video [‘Connecting with your baby \(1-4m\)’](#).



3

**I am
Tired/
Sleepy!**

When baby is in an environment with too much stimulation, being tired or bored, he may show the following cues:

Below 6 Months Old



Sucking
fingers
or fist



Eyes
staring
into space
/ dull-
looking

Making
sounds or
babbling
with a
frown to
complain



Not
interested
in toys or
you,
difficult to
draw his
attention



Yawning



Jerky movements,
arching back

6 Months or Older 🧒



- Rubbing his eyes
- Turning his face away
- Clinging and demanding attention

TIPS



1. Reduce the stimulation if possible such as slowing down your motions and lowering your voice to soothe him, or let him take a break.
2. Place him in his cot when he is tired or drowsy.
3. If he is disinterested or bored, change the activity. Observe his responses before you either let him rest or engage him in another activity.

4

I am Distressed

When your baby's needs are not met or he needs your comfort, you may notice these signals:

Frowning



Turning red on his face

Making sounds /
babbling to
complain



Jerky
movements

TIPS



1. When your baby is distressed, she relies on you to comfort her and address her needs. She may become fussy, agitated and cry if her needs cannot be met.
2. With time, you will get to know your baby and can tell what she needs. You can identify her early signals and respond promptly and appropriately before she turns frustrated and cries. Caring of your baby can become more enjoyable.

To know more about baby's cries, you may refer to our leaflet '[Baby's crying](#)' for details.



Babies may show different cues. Some babies yawn, stare into space and fall asleep quietly when tired. Some become fussy and need to be soothed before they can gradually fall asleep themselves. The different expression of cues may relate to the differences in babies' temperament, development, responsiveness of parents, etc. Each child is unique and his cues would change as he grows. Your responsiveness to your baby's cues provides a secure environment for him to keep calm and learn to soothe himself.