

The Crying Game - Top tips to soothe your baby's sobs

by Pinky McKay

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Crying is your baby's language. At first, it is pretty much the only way an infant can communicate his needs and express feelings like discomfort, hunger, exhaustion and loneliness. It is also the only way he can release pent up stress. As your baby grows he will learn other ways to communicate—through facial expressions, body language and, eventually, by telling you how he feels and what he needs. For now, though, here are some tips to help you soothe the sobs:

1. Learn your baby's language: by learning your baby's pre-cry signals – wriggling, anxious facial expressions, little grimaces, flailing arms, 'rooting' at the breast, changes in breathing, and little noises that say "I am working up to a cry", you will be able to see when she is bored, frightened, hungry, tired or overwhelmed, and by responding accordingly, you may be able to avert full-blown crying.

2. Offer Womb Service: Ease the transition from womb to room by snuggling baby against your bare skin and heartbeat - carrying your baby in a sling next to your body is a perfect way to help him feel secure and snug, just as he was in your womb (see tip number 5). In the early weeks, protect your little one's senses by avoiding sudden movements, changes in temperature, loud noises, bright lights and lots of handling by 'strangers'.

3. Feed her: Tiny tummies don't hold enough food to go long between feeds – day or night. Babies also have appetite increases to match growth spurts. If you are breastfeeding, remember, the more your baby sucks, the more milk you will produce. He needs to suck long enough to get the more satisfying hind-milk, which is higher in calories. The best way to do this is to watch your baby, not the clock, and allow your baby to decide when he is finished the first breast, before you switch sides.

4. Respond quickly: You can't spoil a little baby, but if you leave her to cry, she will become more upset as her crying picks up momentum. Soon she won't even know why she was crying in the first place –she will just be crying because she can't stop and will be much harder to settle. If you are breastfeeding, it is particularly important to respond quickly to hunger cues: a baby who is left to work up to a full-blown cry will have a more disorganised suck and may have difficulty latching on correctly (when babies cry, their tongues are pointed towards the roof of their mouths), or she may only suck for a short time before she falls asleep with exhaustion

5. Wear your baby: Studies show that carrying your baby may *prevent* crying – carrying her in a sling against your own warm body will reduce your baby's stress levels and help relieve symptoms of colic and reflux. It is also reputed to help babies adapt more quickly to a day/night sleep cycle. Best of all, you will have two hands free!

6. Try the 'colic carry'. Lie baby face-down across your arm, her cheek at your elbow, or carry her with her backbone against you, pressing her knees against her stomach. Alternatively, lie baby tummy-down across your knees, perhaps with a warm hot-water bottle

on your lap. If baby is restless, don't hold him in a cradle (feeding) position. Instead, try holding him up against your shoulder and walking or gently rocking backwards and forwards.

7. Give him your finger: Sucking is comforting to babies and helps them relax. However the different sucking action between breast and dummy may cause 'nipple confusion' in the early weeks, so offer a clean finger to suck on if it is inconvenient to offer a breast, or baby isn't hungry.

8. All wrapped up: Primitive survival reflexes, such as the startle reflex, which produces spontaneous, jerky movements, even in sleep, can be disturbing (literally). Provide a sense of security by swaddling your baby – wrapping him firmly in a gauze or muslin sheet (in summer) or a soft shawl in winter.

9. Soak away the sobs: A bath will often soothe a tense, crying baby. Try a deep, warm relaxation bath (in an adult bath tub). If baby is over three months you can add a few drops of lavender or chamomile oil for added calming effects.

10. Kick Butt: Studies show that the risk of colic is increased whichever parent smokes. As well as increasing the risk of SIDS, smoking also affects levels of prolactin, the hormone that aids relaxation and milk flow. So at least cut down and smoke outside, away from baby.

11. Food intolerance: If you are breastfeeding and crying spells seem to be related to your diet, write down baby's crying times and what you have eaten. If there appears to be a link, eliminate the suspect food for at least a week. Common culprits are, caffeine, dairy produce (milk, cheese, yoghurt), citrus, chocolate and peanuts.

12. A gentle touch: With warm hands and warm oil, massage baby when he is calm at first, so he associates your gentle touch with relaxation. Tummy massage can move wind, encourage digestion and help ease constipation: massage in a clockwise direction –the direction the food will travel. If you alternately massage your baby's tummy and bend his knees, you may release trapped wind (see Pinky's baby massage DVD at www.infantmassagedvd.com for detailed instructions on how to massage gently, safely and respectfully) .

13. Beat the blues: If baby has a regular crying time or suffers from colic, try to pre-empt the wails with a combination of massage and a relaxation bath about an hour before his usual crying time.

14. Soothing sounds: Sing a lullaby, including your baby's name, or play gentle classical music –try the baby 'b's –Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Baroque music.

15. Take care of yourself: Eat well, especially at breakfast, to maintain energy levels, take a good multi vitamin, exercise to stimulate endorphins ('feel good' hormones) and snuggle up with your baby during the afternoon – a siesta can have a marked effect on your milk supply as well as your stamina, and may help ease your baby's (and your own) stress levels.