

### Comforting a Crying Baby

How to comfort and soothe babies

By Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Honig: When one of the babies in my care cries, I can't seem to figure out what's wrong. He cries even after being fed and changed, and even after his nap. What's going on?

Some babies have a lot more separation anxiety than others. Between 9 and 16 months, some infants become very upset when separated from their parents. They are used to a certain kind of hand pressure on their bottom or neck as they are held to a shoulder. When you are caring for an infant with high separation anxiety, you need to give a lot of bodily reassurance. It may take time for a baby to get used to the feel of your arms and your way of holding and carrying him.

### Get to Know One Another

Babies familiarize themselves, through frequent body contact, with your scent as well as your motions. Make a mental note to give this particular baby lots of contact time. He will gradually get to know your scent and ways of holding. He will also feel more comfortable with you despite the daily separation from his parents.

### Find the Familiar

Sometimes a baby comes from a family that speaks another language. In this case, distress over the strangeness of the childcare facility can last for many weeks. If you can find a temporary volunteer from the same language community, who can hold and talk to the baby in his native language, the strangeness of the group environment will lessen and ease the transition into the English-speaking world of childcare.

### Offer Comforting Touches

Babies thrive on loving touches. Research with older toddlers shows that babies who are rarely touched have 20 percent smaller brain volume compared to babies who are touched a great deal. Because you have several infants to care for, you may not be giving enough "hands-on" loving touches to this baby. Babies who are used to a lot of holding and cuddling may cry when placed in group care, missing the comfort of being snuggled in someone's arms for hours. If a baby is sitting on the floor playing with toys, bend down and caress his hair or rub his back reassuringly.

### Tune In to Tone

Babies are very sensitive to the different qualities of human voices. Some babies will burst into tears hearing their parents quarrel or use sharp, angry voices. You may need to experiment to see which tones best soothe each baby in your care. Some babies love low, slow speech. Some babies respond best to high-pitched "parentese." Babies thrust out their legs in rhythmic pleasure, keeping tempo with the adult's high-pitched tones as they listen to the drawn-out syllables. Studies show that hearing this "parentese" correlates to bursts of brain activity. This means that when you use "parentese," not only are you getting the baby's attention and happy body responses, but you are also hardwiring brain connections.

### Respond to Distress

Sometimes very young babies have colic, or gas pains. You can easily identify this problem if a baby is put to sleep after a feeding and then wakes up with piercing cries within 15 minutes or so. You can also watch how a baby's face looks distressed and his legs bend and jerk up toward his tummy, as if the baby is experiencing stomach pains. Keeping a baby's tummy warm and holding him close while jiggling your own body are ways to ease this distress. ECT

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### How to Soothe a Baby

- If the infant is very young, use a baby sling to carry him and still have your hands free to care for other babies. Feeling the warmth of your body and the swaying movements as you walk or bend will help the infant become more accustomed to you.
- With an older baby who still has separation anxiety, you may need to hold him at your shoulder or perch him on an arm as you walk around. When you have to go pick up a new stack of diapers, or go over to the sink to get a clean spoon, be sure that this baby gets picked up and travels along on your arm. Babies who feel deeply familiar and comfortable with you will lessen their crying.
- Use gentle loving touches whenever possible. Try touches during diapering times, feeding times, and especially at nap times. As you soothe a baby into sleep, be sure to rub his back over and over.
- At nap times, croon lullaby melodies. Use soft tones, and sing the same melodies repeatedly so that babies get familiar with the pitch and tone of your voice and learn to love the melodies you chant, sing, and croon.
- Use “parentese” with long, drawn-out syllables, repetitions, simple phrases, and a high-pitched, happy tone of voice.
- If a very young baby is suffering from colic, make sure that you try burping him very thoroughly during and after feedings. Hold the baby's stomach against yours so you warm the baby's tummy and relax the muscles that are stiffened in pain. Use reassuring words to let the baby know that you empathize with his distress.