



The amazing cry of a newborn

1. An infant's cry – the perfect signal.

Scientists have long appreciated that the sound of an infant's cry has all three features of a perfect signal.

- ✓ First, a perfect signal is automatic. A newborn cries by reflex. The infant senses a need, then cries to communicate that she needs something.
- ✓ Second, the cry is ear-piercing enough to get the caregiver's attention, but not so disturbing as to make the listener want to avoid the sound altogether.
- ✓ Third, the cry can be modified to communicate effectively. Each baby's signal is unique. A baby's cry is a baby's language, and each baby cries differently. Voice researchers call these unique sounds "cry prints." These prints are as unique as fingerprints.

2. Responding to baby's cries is biologically driven.

A mother is biologically programmed to give a nurturing response to her newborn's cries. Upon hearing her baby cry, the blood flow to a mother's breasts increases, accompanied by a biological urge to "pick up and nurse." Oxytocin, the hormone that causes a mother's milk to letdown, brings feelings of relaxation and pleasure; a pleasant release from the tension built up by the baby's cry.

3. Should a parent ignore or respond to the cry signal?

Once you appreciate the special signal value of your baby's cry, the important thing is what you do about it. You have two basic options: ignore or respond. Ignoring your baby's cry is usually a lose-lose situation. A more compliant baby gives up and stops signaling, becomes withdrawn, eventually realizes that crying is not worthwhile, and concludes that he is not worthwhile. The baby loses the motivation to communicate with his parents, and the parents miss out on opportunities to get to know their baby. Everyone loses. You could desensitize yourself completely so that you're not "bothered" at all by the cry. This is another lose-lose situation; baby doesn't get what he needs and parents remain stuck in a mindset where they can't enjoy their baby's unique personality. Or, you could pick baby up to calm him but then put him right back down because "it's not time to feed him yet." He has to learn, after all, to be happy "on his own." Lose-lose again; he will start to cry again and you will feel angry. He will learn that his communication cues, though heard, are not responded to, which can lead him to distrust his own perceptions: "Maybe they're right. Maybe I'm not hungry."

4. The nurturing response.

This is the win-win way for baby and parent to work out a communication system that helps them both. The parent responds promptly and sensitively so that baby will feel less frantic the next time he needs something. The baby learns to "cry better" in a less disturbing way since he knows his parent will come. Parents structure the baby's environment so that there is less need for him to cry. A quick response when baby is young and falls apart easily or when the cry makes it clear there is real danger; a slower response when the baby is older and begins to learn how to settle disturbances on his own.

5. What cry research tells us.

Researchers Sylvia Bell and Mary Ainsworth performed studies in the 1970's that should put an end to parents ever worrying about "spoiling" their babies. These researchers studied two groups of mother-infant pairs. Group 1 mothers gave a prompt and nurturing response to their infant's cries. Group 2 mothers were more restrained in their response. They found that children in Group 1 whose mothers had given an early and more nurturing response were less likely to use crying as a means of communication at one year of age. These children seemed more securely attached to their mothers and had developed better communicative skills, becoming less whiny, clingy and demanding.

More studies were done to shoot down the spoiling theory, showing that babies whose cries were not promptly responded to begin to cry more, longer, and in a more disturbing way. In one study comparing two groups of crying babies, one group of infants received an immediate, nurturing response to their cries, while the other group was left to cry-it-out. The babies whose cries were sensitively attended to cried 70% less. The babies in the cry-it-out group, on the other hand, did not decrease their crying. In essence, crying research concludes that babies whose cries are listened and responded to, learned to "cry better." The infants who were ignored more often, learned to "cry harder."

7. Crying isn't "good for baby's lungs."

One of the most ridiculous pieces of medical folklore is the saying: "Let baby cry, it's good for his lungs." In the late 1970's, research showed that babies who were left to cry had heart rates that reached worrisome levels and lowered oxygen levels in their blood. When these infants' cries were soothed, their cardiovascular system rapidly returned to normal. When a baby's cries are not soothed, he remains in distress.