

How To Cope With Crying

*The University of Pittsburgh
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Every time her four-month-old son cries, Vicki responds immediately. Her husband thinks she is overreacting. “He just wants attention,” he says. “He’s manipulating you. Don’t spoil him.”

But to Vicki, when Joel cries, he is telling her something is wrong.

Who is correct? Vicki is, and she will not spoil Joel by responding immediately to his calls for help.

All babies cry, some more often than others. But when infants approximately six months or younger cry, it is a reflexive response to distress. They are not deliberately manipulating their parents. Only after the age of about six months do babies begin to control their crying, and usually it’s months later that they might cry simply to get your attention.

It is important for parents to be able to cope with crying. An infant’s cry is one of the more painful stimuli for humans, and many new parents get a good dose of it.

Babies seldom cry much immediately after birth, but they may start crying more during the first three weeks of life. Crying usually peaks at 6 to 12 weeks, and then subsides.

Young babies usually cry for a reason, such as when they are hungry, in pain, or have a wet or full diaper.

If your baby is young, respond immediately to crying and try to determine what is bothering him or her. Responding quickly won’t spoil the child. In fact, a quick response may teach your baby that a mild cry is sufficient to get help.

The ways to calm a crying baby are simple and time-tested. Hold your baby and gently, but firmly, restrict movement of your infant’s arms and legs. Rhythmically rock your baby; talk or sing; give your baby something pleasant to look at. You might also try giving your baby something to suck on, such as a pacifier or a clean finger.

Although crying is normal, it sometimes warrants a call to the doctor. Do so, for example, if you suspect colic, your infant won’t calm down, or if your baby is older than three months and cries uncontrollably several hours over several days.

Remember, the most important way to cope with crying is to remain calm yourself. Recognize and control your stress. If the crying is too much for you, ask for help from your spouse, other relatives, and friends.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.