

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Constant Crying

Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in Infants and Toddlers

Four Strategies That Work to Move From Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My baby loves to be held and won't stop crying if I put him down. What can I do to help him stay calm, even when I'm not holding him?

Crying is one of your baby's earliest ways of communicating with you. In fact, he is learning about his own ability to communicate through your response to his cries. You will not always be available to hold your baby when he is upset, but there are many things you can do to deal with your baby's constant crying and, at the same time, help build a strong foundation for the life skill of Communicating, even before your baby can talk. These things will help your child learn to communicate with words later on.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University says,

Language development is not an end point. It's a process that starts with the very first smiles, the very first gaze, the very first back-and-forth [connection]. That turns into an opportunity for us to label words and for children to map those words together with their ideas, to understand the intents and minds of others and to express what they want to say.

- 1. Observe your child.** At this age, your baby uses crying in several ways: to get help when hungry or uncomfortable, to release tension and to shut out sensations that are too much, like loud noises or bright lights. Be a detective and see if you can figure out what your baby is trying to tell you:
 - Can you tell the difference among your baby's cries?
 - Does he have one kind of cry when he is hungry, a different one when he is upset and a different one when he seems to be uncomfortable?
 - Is there a physical reason for this crying? Does he have colic or a sensitivity to too much stimulation?

Once you begin to understand the reasons behind your baby's cries, you can figure out what to do.

- 2. Respond to your baby's cues.** If you suspect that there may be a physical reason that affects his crying, check with your doctor, who can advise you on how to respond. If not, know that crying is the main way that your son is communicating with you.

Once you have learned the difference in your baby's cries, you can take action accordingly, by feeding him if he is hungry or by trying to get him to sleep if he is tired. If you find that your child is very sensitive to stimulation, then try to create an environment that is as soothing as possible.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the best way to handle crying is to respond promptly to your infant's cries in the early months. You cannot spoil a young baby by giving him attention. If you answer his calls for help, he will learn that there are people who are there to help him and he will eventually cry less.

Part of playing detective is paying attention to what YOU do that works best in calming your son down. Keep doing what works! When you respond sensitively to what your child is trying to tell you with his behavior, you are showing him that what he has to say is important, even though he is communicating to you with cries, not words.

Here are some other strategies you can use to help calm your baby and build the life skill of Communicating:

- Think of yourself as a sportscaster and describe what your baby is doing. Say things like: “You don’t like that I’m changing your diaper. The wipes are cold and you are sleepy.” This helps your baby feel understood and cared for, while he develops connections between his feelings and actions, an important part of helping him manage and of developing the skill of Communicating.
- If you are unable to hold your baby, assure him that you are still there for him by using your voice to reassure him. Sing songs, make silly faces and talk to him. Say things like: “I have to take a hot pan out of the oven. I will pick you up when I am all done.”

These actions will help your child eventually use words as a way of expressing himself later on. Children can understand words long before they can use them.

From her work with premature babies, Heidelise Als of Children’s Hospital Boston and the Harvard Medical School has found that it is important to try to understand the language of children’s behavior to figure out how they function best and then build on what they do to calm themselves down.

3. Build on your child’s strengths. Very young children can learn to manage stress on their own when they are supported by adults who build on the coping strategies they already have. Look for the techniques YOUR CHILD already uses to help himself calm down and help him use these techniques when he is upset. Ask yourself:

- Does he have a favorite toy, object or piece of clothing that seems to settle him down?
- Does my child like to be wrapped snugly or worn in a carrier?
- Does he quiet when he hears singing, talking or soft music?
- Does my baby like rhythmic sounds, like humming or shushing?

As your baby gets older, he will gain more control over his feelings and actions. You are helping him learn to use that control by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

In her studies of how adults talk with babies, Janet Werker of the University of British Columbia has found that children pay close attention not just to their parents’ voices, but also to their facial expressions. Werker says:

[Babies] listen to the sounds of language, they pay attention to the facial expressions that accompany those sounds, [and] they pay attention to the entire communicative context in which language is expressed.

4. Think about how you respond to your baby and get help when you can. It is not just what you say to your baby that matters, but how you say it. Your baby pays close attention to the feelings you are expressing on your face and with your tone of voice.

If you are understandably feeling worn out by his constant crying, get help as you can to give yourself a break and time to regroup. You will be able to respond more positively to his crying when you are feeling cared for, too!

These four strategies will promote the life skill of Communicating and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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