

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Spoiling Baby

Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in Infants

Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My infant cries and is “fussy.” Will I spoil her if I respond to every cry?

The American Academy of Pediatrics says a young infant cannot be “spoiled” by holding and cuddling. It is important to respond to your baby's crying now because it actually will decrease clingy behavior later on.

- 1. See if your baby needs something.** Babies communicate their basic NEEDS by fussing—they are too young to communicate their wants. To figure out what your daughter needs, become a detective. Ask yourself:
 - “Can I figure out WHAT she needs by watching?” Are there clues? For example, eye rubbing and glazed eyes probably mean your baby is tired. Rooting (trying to suck something) probably means your baby is hungry. Squirming may mean your baby needs changing.
 - “WHEN is my daughter most likely to get fussy?” Which situations tend to make her most upset (for example, loud noises, bright lights, lots of other people in the room)? Are there times of day when she is fussier than other times (after she has been awake for a few hours, before meal time)? When you understand what prompts fussiness, you can do your best to prevent these from getting out of hand (such as giving your baby a nap before he or she becomes exhausted).

Jack Shonkoff from Harvard Center for the Developing Child says, “There is no learning without relationships.”

- 2. Respond to your baby's needs.** You are building a trusting relationship with her where she learns she can count on you to take care of her. Trusting relationships help children feel secure and safe, and studies have found this leads to less fussiness later on.

On the other hand, you don't want to respond to every cry as if something terrible is about to happen because children can sense adults' feelings of anxiety. This is where promoting the skill of Focus and Self Control comes in. You ultimately want to help children learn to manage their own upset feelings. While that's a learning process that takes place throughout childhood and beyond, it begins in infancy.

Pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton of Harvard Medical School developed The Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale to help parents and pediatricians understand the language of the newborns' behavior—including how they calm themselves down. In this assessment, a doctor or nurse shines a flashlight on the newborn or shakes a rattle above them to see how they react. The babies typically get upset by the noise or light and then find a way to recover—by sucking a finger, shutting their eyes or turning away from the commotion. Each baby has a different way of calming down, which is what the assessment is aimed at understanding. It is the beginnings of the skill of Focus and Self Control!

- 3. Figure out what helps your baby become less fussy.** As a first step in promoting Focus and Self Control, become a detective again to pay attention to what you do to help your daughter calm down. For example, does she calm down when being held and rocked or when swaddled? Does listening to you sing help? Does playing with her help? For example, when you stick out your tongue, does your baby stick out her tongue, copying you and calming down in the process?
- 4. Watch what your baby does to calm down and build on “what works” in helping your baby learn self control.** When you have figured out what works, build on these strategies to help your child manage. In the beginning, you are important in helping your child calm down (by holding and rocking your child, for example). Ultimately, you want your child to learn to calm herself down, so foster ways that don’t just depend on you. You may notice your baby calm herself down by putting her hands in her mouth or sucking her fingers, thumbs and pacifiers or by looking at something new or interesting.

Berry Brazelton says:

Every time babies put themselves together in the face of stress or stimulation, they’re getting internal feedback that says, ‘You learned. You just did it!’ And if they do it over and over, it becomes part of the equipment. When the adult reinforces these internal feedback systems, but doesn’t take them over, we are giving that baby not only the chance to learn, but also a chance to experience the excitement of learning.

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

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

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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