



Center for Early Education and Development

Am I Spoiling My Baby?

Many parents worry they may be spoiling their baby if they respond quickly every time their baby cries. On the one hand, they feel a strong urge to make things better immediately when their baby signals that he or she is upset. But at the same time, they think that by responding to every cry they might be making their baby overly dependent and clingy, or be teaching their baby to expect always to get what he or she wants. Sometimes friends or even the baby's grandparents say things like, "Why do you jump every time she cries? It's good for babies to cry!"

Responding is Not "Spoiling"

Well, take heart! Your instincts to respond right away to your baby's cries are right on track. Recent research has shown that responding to your baby's cries will not spoil your baby. In fact, babies who have been responded to quickly and consistently, especially during the first six to eight months of life, actually cry less than babies who have been left to cry. And as toddlers, the babies whose cries were responded to promptly and consistently are more independent than the children whose cries were not responded to.

It seems that one of the most important things for a baby to learn is that others will respond to him in a caring and predictable way. This also tells him that he is capable of making his needs known and getting a response. These experiences allow the baby to develop a strong trust in others and in self, a basic sense of security that the world is a good, safe place to be and that he can play an active role in this world.

When that security is established in infancy, then the child is free to begin exploring the world on her own, knowing that she can seek and receive help and

comfort when she needs it. So it makes good sense that a child whose cries were responded to in infancy will be less likely to be whiny, clingy, and "spoiled," and will be more likely to be confident, independent, and ready to go out and explore and learn.

A Variety of Responses

You may be saying to yourself, "But I can't always respond to my child!" Of course you can't — no one can. It is the "average" of experiences that is important to your child, so usually responding promptly should be enough. It's also important to keep in mind that "responding" doesn't only mean big responses like feeding or taking your baby to bed with you. In fact, if that were the only way you responded to your baby's cries, your baby might become "spoiled" in a way, having learned that the only way to be comforted is to be fed or to go to bed with Mom or Dad. So it's good to know and use a variety of ways of responding to your baby. Sometimes if you respond when your baby first begins to fuss, just the sound of your voice will be enough to help your baby settle down. With a young baby, moving close and talking softly in his or her ear can be effective. Other times holding your hand firmly but gently on the baby's back or tummy will be calming. For very young babies, crossing their arms over their tummies or wrapping them snugly in a blanket many help them to feel more calm and organized. When they become more upset their arms flail wildly, which just makes them feel more upset. Your baby's cry also may be a way of asking for you to respond by changing a diaper, feeding, or a moving your baby into a different position.



Crying is Communicating

The important thing to remember is that your baby's cry is a way of asking for something. It is one of the major ways your baby has of communicating with you. Just as you like to be listened to when you talk, so does your baby. This is the basis for your baby's development of good feelings and self and others, feelings he or she will carry forward through life.

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