

Learning About Normal and Abnormal Infant Cry Periods

“How long should I let my baby cry?” This is the most common question asked by new moms. Answering isn’t difficult, once you know how to identify both normal and abnormal cry periods. The timing of your baby’s cry is the first clue to understanding how you should respond. During the first four months of life, there are six possible cry periods. Three are classified as abnormal and three as normal.

Abnormal cry times include the following:

- a) during feedings;
- b) immediately after feedings;
- c) at times when baby wakes early out of a sound nap.

Crying during any one of these periods requires immediate attention. Don’t wait for the crying to subside. Investigate it, looking for the root cause. These are not trainable cry periods, such as those times when you put your baby down for a nap. They come about due to legitimate need.

Crying during Feeding. Crying during feeding might occur if your baby isn’t getting enough food or isn’t taking in food fast enough. There could be a number of reasons for these conditions, including improper latching on or poor milk release.

Crying Immediately after Feeding. If your baby cries routinely within thirty minutes after his or her feeding, and the cry sounds like a pain cry rather than a sleepiness cry, it may be caused by one of several factors:

1. Trapped gas. Young babies often swallow air during feedings. This air must be brought up again. Burp your baby by holding him or her against your shoulder, on your lap, or over your knee. Trapped gas is the first reason to consider when a baby wakes up thirty minutes into a nap. This cry is sometimes a high-pitched scream. If that is the case, pick the baby up, try burping and cuddling for a moment, then put the baby back down.
2. Your diet. If you are breast-feeding, consider what you are eating. Be careful to avoid eating too many dairy products or spicy foods. You don’t have to completely eliminate these foods from your diet, but you may have to cut back considerably.
3. A milk quality problem. A breast-feeding mother can have a sufficient quantity of milk but at the same time not have a sufficient quality of milk. As a result, the baby responds with a hunger cry cue within an hour. Although this condition is relatively rare, it may affect as many as 5 percent of nursing mothers. What can you do to improve this condition? Check your diet and seek your pediatrician’s counsel. He may recommend a nutritionist.

Waking Early Out of a Sound Nap. If your baby wakes out of a sound sleep with a strong cry, it may be the result of a combination of any of the three factors mentioned above. It might

be because her sleep schedule was disrupted from a previous late evening or hectic morning. It might also be the 45-minute intruder. One day your baby just begins to wake up 45 minutes early, because she is hungry even though your last feeding was a full feeding.

If this happens to your baby treat it first as a hunger need. It is probably a growth spurt so adjust your daily routine to allow for a few more feedings during the day. If the child is not interested in eating, then you begin to look for other causes. That is what assessment will do for you, pinpoint the real problems and real needs.

Normal Crying Periods

Other than the abnormal cry periods just discussed (which always require your prompt attention), some crying is normal and should be expected. The normal cry periods are as follows:

- a) just before feeding;
- b) when baby is put down for a nap;
- c) during the late afternoon/early evening period.

Crying Just before Feeding. Under normal circumstances, any crying that occurs just before a feeding should be limited, since the next event for the baby is mealtime. If your baby is hungry, feed him or her. If the child routinely shows signs of hunger before the next scheduled feeding, then find out why, rather than letting the baby cry it out. Your baby's routine is to serve you and your baby, not the reverse.

Crying When Going Down for a Nap. When your baby goes down for a nap, the duration of crying is set by the child but monitored by the parent. The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that: "Many babies cannot fall asleep without crying and will go to sleep more quickly if left to cry for a while. The crying shouldn't last long if the child is truly tired." 2

It is not unusual for a sleeping baby to occasionally begin whimpering or crying softly in the middle of a nap. Again, the words of the American Academy of Pediatrics are helpful in understanding what might be going on: The AAP writes: "Sometimes you may think your baby is waking up when she's actually going through a phase of very light slumber. She could be squirming, startling, fussing, or even crying—and still be asleep. Or she may be awake but on the verge of drifting off again if left alone. Don't make the mistake of trying to comfort her during these moments; you'll only awaken her further and delay her going back to sleep. Instead, if you let her fuss and even cry for a few minutes, she'll learn to get herself to sleep without relying on you." 2 The Academy goes on to say that "some babies actually need to let off energy by crying in order to settle into sleep or rouse themselves out of it. As much as fifteen to twenty minutes of fussing won't do your child any harm. Just be sure she's not crying out of hunger or pain, or because her diaper is wet." 3

You can't stand to hear baby cry? Join the club, but remember what's truly important. There's a purpose here. Without a goal in mind, i.e., teaching healthy sleep habits, letting your baby cry before falling asleep at naptimes makes little sense. The absence of an attainable and measurable goal breeds doubt and confusion. Why are you doing this uncomfortable thing? Who needs all the added stress? However, if you recognized the long term benefits of sleep for babies and toddlers, then some temporary crying is preferable over long-term poorly established sleep skills.

Some children cry fifteen minutes before falling asleep. Others vary the duration of their cry from five minutes at one naptime to an off-and-on, thirty-five-minute cry at another. If your baby cries longer than ten minutes, check on her. Pat her on the back, possibly holding her for a moment. Then try putting her back down in her crib. Remember, you are not training your baby not to cry, but training her in the skill of healthy sleep. This may be the only time in your baby's day that the practice of nonintervention is best.

Crying During the Late Afternoon/Early Evening Period. Most babies have a personal fussy time. A fussy time in the late afternoon is not uncommon. That's true of both bottle- and breast-fed infants. There is no reason for you to be anxious about your fussy baby, because you are in good company. Literally millions of mothers and fathers are going through the same thing at nearly the same time each day.

If a child is not comforted by the baby swing, an infant seat, siblings, or grandma, consider the crib. At least there he has the chance of falling asleep. If you have a baby who becomes exceptionally and continuously fussy, consider the possibility that he is hungry. How is your milk supply? Are you eating right? Check what you are eating. Hot, spicy foods or a large intake of dairy products can be common contributors to a baby's fussy behavior at any time of day. Wrong foods in your diet easily amplify your baby's normal fussy time and create nightmares for young parents. It simply is not worth the aggravation. Learn to watch your intake.

There is no precise time limitation for normal periods of crying. It might be twenty seconds, or twenty minutes. Think carefully about each cry situation. Use your God given mind Determine when you should intervene and when you need to hold back. What is this called? It is called parental assessment. The very thing needed to rightly guide that little life. In time, and as a result of your training, your baby will go down for naps and nighttime sleep without crying. He will actually find sleep a welcomed friend.

Four Things to do When Your Baby Cries

How should you respond when your baby cries? Unless you sense your baby is in danger, take a moment to listen and assess his or her crying. After a brief assessment, take the appropriate action. Here are some practical and somewhat more detailed steps to follow.

Listen for the Type of Cry. Even in the early days and weeks, you will begin to distinguish different tones and patterns in your baby's crying. Simply stop and listen. You may find that the crying ends as quickly as it began. By listening you can determine a right response. If a child has a dirty diaper, are you going to feed him or her? Of course not. If your baby has trapped gas, is food the answer? Never. If your baby cries because of an ear infection, is nursing what the baby needs? Hardly. Your baby is working hard to spell out his or her needs. Get to know your baby by decoding baby's cries.

Think about where your baby is in his or her routine. Is naptime finished or is your baby in the middle of his or her nap, in need of resettling? Does your baby need to go down for a nap? Has she been in the swing too long? Did he lose his toy? Did she spit up? Is this your baby's fussy time of day? This is only a short list of why your baby might be crying. Many reasons other than hunger can just as quickly turn on the tears.

Take action based on what you have heard and reasonably concluded. Just remember, sometimes the best action is no action at all. For example, if your baby is clean, fed, and ready for naptime, let him or her learn how to fall asleep alone. This may be precisely what your baby needs. If you try to nurse your child to sleep, you have only succeeded in manipulating his or her sleep. In the long run, you are digging for yourself that big, black hole of endless sleepless nights into the toddler years.

Take note of how long your baby cries. After watching the clock just one time, many moms have been shocked to learn that the seemingly endless bout of shrieking lasted all of five to ten minutes. In the event that you have listened, waited, and determined that the crying is not subsiding, gather more information by checking on the baby. Peek into his or her crib and see if your baby has become jammed into a corner. In that case you simply move your baby and offer a gentle pat on the back before leaving the room.

There will be times when your assessment calls for picking up and holding your baby. You simply may need to reassure the child that everything is all right. Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason behind the need for special time in mommy's arms. Your assessment may produce many options.

Ref.

1. Caring for Your Baby and Young Child—Birth to Age Five: The Complete and Authoritative Guide (The American Academy of Pediatrics), ed. Steven P. Shelov M.D., F.A.A.P. (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), pp. 34-47.

2. Ibid p. 36

3. Ibid., pp. 188-89.

4. Ibid., p. 189.

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