

Baby Crying: Why Listening to Nursing Children Builds Connection

By Patty Wipfler, Founder, HandinHand Parenting



What children need.

When a baby is first born, we have the delightful, delicate task of getting to know her. We learn how she sleeps, how she eats, and see how she gazes into our eyes with trust and interest. She needs nourishment, closeness, familiarity and warmth, affection, and at times she needs respite from the barrage of new experiences that each moment brings. Nursing is one of baby's safe harbors, and nursing mothers feel lucky to provide so much, so easily.

Nursing is important for mothers, too. It gives them a sense of full permission to express the love they feel toward their babies. They give in a very personal way, and reach depths of affection and attachment they didn't know were possible. When it goes well, nursing contributes to a mother's sense of her power and

importance, counterbalancing the messages from our culture that trivialize her work.

Some confusions: how to meet your child's real need. There are, however, a couple of basic confusions that parents of nursing children experience sooner or later. The first one is obvious. When your otherwise healthy, robust child wakes seven times in the night wanting to nurse, you wonder how to meet her needs. How should you respond to your one-year-old's dive for the breast when she's afraid of new people? What about the two-year-old who can't fall asleep without nursing? A baby's needs for comfort and for nourishment can get tangled, and we have understandable difficulty in knowing how to help.

Fathers: The second confusion is more subtle, but quite important. It's the assumption on the part of many fathers that they won't be as important to their baby as mommy is, because the nursing relationship is so close. The intimacy of nursing looks exclusive. Fathers often feel that, because of nursing, they must play a secondary role during those first months and years of a child's life.

Feelings – the missing piece of the puzzle: Both of these confusions arise because a vital piece of information has been missing. We've begun to uncover the importance of listening to the *feelings* our infants express. We're finding that closer relationships and clearer communication between infants and parents are possible when parents listen to their babies' feelings.

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Listening is a very direct way to convey your love to your child. Your willingness to listen can create as strong a bond between you as nursing does, and it fills important needs your child has that nursing cannot fill. As you experiment with this new information, you'll learn how to resolve the confusion about when to nurse and when your child needs you to hear how she feels. Perhaps best of all, by listening well, fathers can attain a deep level of trust and closeness with their children, which is as important as the nursing relationship.

Babies feel things deeply in the moment: Let me explain. Babies and young children live in the moment. When they are sad, they are sad through and through. When they are frustrated, they feel like they can't live one more second inside their own skins. When they are happy, their love is as broad and bountiful as sunlight.

Children respond immediately to unfavourable conditions with vigorous crying or tantrums.

We, with good will and concern, assume that we can undo any unfavourable condition within a short period of time. We feel that it's our responsibility as parents to find out what's wrong and to fix it fast, to restore our precious child to her life of pleasure.



Crying can mean that there's something to fix

There are many things our babies and toddlers cry about that can be and should be fixed right away. The diaper that is taped too tight, the toy that pinches a child's finger, the hunger she feels, the fright she experiences around large dogs. These are the kinds of things we can remedy in response to our little one's crying. Our quick response is part of how she knows that she is important in our lives. We must respond with care and confidence if she is to grow up with a strong sense of her worth.

It *always* makes sense to respond to a crying child. It always makes sense to mentally run through your checklist of possible causes for the crying. And it always makes sense to consult your physician if your child does not look like she is thriving, or if you notice some unusual condition, whether she is crying or not.

Sometimes, there's nothing you can fix

But there are things our babies and toddlers cry about that we cannot fix right away. And there are things they cry about that have no immediate discernible cause. Here is where confusion sets in.

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Babies cry about their gas pains, about having their diapers changed, and when we walk away from them to answer the door. Toddlers cry at the attention of a friendly stranger, when we put them down to walk, and when we put them in their car seats. There are many occasions when children begin to cry and nothing harmful or threatening is happening to them. And often, the uneasiness a baby feels is due to something a parent has no immediate power to fix. It simply can't be relieved. For instance, a baby will cry about indigestion, an illness, teething, or a sudden fright, but there's no switch to flip to make the situation better. These are the times that try the souls of mothers and fathers.



For example, your baby has just been fed, and is resting in your arms. You gaze at her and begin telling her how lovely she is. She looks into your eyes for a moment, then shuts her eyes, turns her head, tightens her little fists and begins to cry. What in the world happened? Does she need to burp? Is she wet? Cold? Is it colic?

As you check each of these possibilities, no cause for her crying is apparent, and yet she continues with great abandon. Or perhaps your eighteen-month-old son bumps his knee and runs to you. You speak to him gently and ask him if he wants to nurse. He indicates yes, but when you offer him your breast he gets

angry, pushing on you and wiggling. So you let him down and he gets angrier, crying and throwing himself down on the floor. You pick him up again, feeling badly because it looks like he wants to nurse and you missed his cues. But everything you do seems to intensify his unhappiness.

These are the times when you can safely relax and listen. These are times your child needs you close, relaxed, and unworried. These are times when it's important that you apply yourself to hearing all about the downside of life as a very small child.

Like you, your baby has feelings

What we must realize is that our babies and toddlers don't lead lives of complete ease and comfort. We may be gentle, loving, understanding parents, and they may be healthy, thriving, sunny children. Still, every child has had some experiences that have been painful, confusing, frightening, and sad.

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Birth itself is not all that easy for most babies. They have lived through nine months of a complex development process, have been born into a world totally new to them, and have had feelings and perceptions all along.

Our children have had good feelings and accurate perceptions: "I'm warm and safe next to Mommy." "There's my Daddy's gentle voice. I'm loved!" And sometimes they've had bad feelings or inaccurate perceptions: "I'm alone in my bed. I can't stand it." "Daddy left the room—I'm abandoned!"

When babies and toddlers don't feel good, they begin to cry. We parents must decide whether there is any present difficulty and if so, how to fix it.

We usually fill this role well. We go to our child and feed her, change her, hold her, change her position, keep the big dog away from her, or talk to her about the stranger. We solve the present difficulty as well as we can.

Settling them down may not be the answer: If there is no real present difficulty, or if the present difficulty cannot be fixed (gas pains, being laid down for a diaper change, or having to sit in the car seat) most of us assume that the child should stop crying because we can tell that it doesn't make sense to cry. We try to get them "settled down" with patting, bouncing, walking, rubbing, pacifiers, special toys, and, sometimes, the breast. We worry that a crying child is not doing well and not feeling our love, and we think that she will do better as soon as she is able to stop expressing her upset.

Crying can help: In many years of work with parents, babies, and toddlers, I have become increasingly confident that crying when there is no real present difficulty, or when a situation can't immediately be fixed, can serve a progressive purpose in a child's life. And I am equally sure that learning how to "be there" for your child when she cries is one of the most rewarding lessons of parenthood.

Accompany her through her upset: It's a lesson about accompanying a child as she faces hardship. You hold her close and fill your child's need for acceptance while she struggles with the temporarily hard parts of life. Her confidence in herself will deepen if you don't distract her from the challenges she faces.

The thorn in her side: Before talking about this role you can play and how it relates to nursing, let me make clear the assumptions about children that underlie the approach I



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describe. I think we can assume that each child is born capable of loving, receiving love, and of learning at a great rate. Also, we can assume that children are cooperative, affectionate, and pleased with themselves and others, without instruction from us. They are born with a loving and generous nature. The last assumption is that when a child isn't easygoing and cooperative, some physical discomfort or set of bad feelings is working at her—like a thorn in her side.



In your arms, crying heals the hurt

If you've made sure she is fed, clean, and in your good company, then she'll cry or rage to dislodge those thorny feelings. Once she has finished with her tears or tantrums, frightened trembling or yawns (which may appear in the middle of a good cry), she will go back to being relaxed, loving, easygoing, and affectionate. She'll feel pleased with herself and with you. Very young children often cry long and hard, yawn a few times, and then fall into a deeply relaxed sleep. They awaken bright and sunny, eager for the rest of the day.

She is recovering: This process is a remarkable self-correcting one that children use to recover from the difficult times they have had. When you leave the room, your baby may have been tenderly hoping you would pick her up. You leave, not knowing that she'd wanted you at that moment, and she

feels personally rejected, just as if you had known she wanted you. She begins to cry, not just to call you back, but also because your departure hurt her feelings. When you return and pick her up, if she continues to cry, she is taking some time to rid herself of the insecurity she just experienced. She is recovering her own confidence in herself and in you. You cannot order her to feel better, to know she is loved. You can listen to the bad feelings through, to help her to recover her trust and throw open her windows on your love.

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Crying helps a baby to connect again

You know that when you have arrived to help a crying child, you can often jiggle or pacify the child into silence. However, she may be distant and dazed, unable to make eye contact with you, and unable to play or have fun. In fact, if you catch her eye and tell her reassuring things, she may begin to cry again. This is a sign that the hurt has not yet been healed. The child still can't enjoy her life in the moment, because bad feelings are still on her mind. She needs to



tell you more about the upset she feels before its hold on her is broken.

As you listen, your baby feels your support

We parents want to quickly make everything better for our children. But their fears, their sadness and their frustrations take some time to heal. If we listen at these times, they will *show us* the feelings stuck inside. If we can stay near,

hold them and tell them that we care, they will feel like we are understanding and helping. They don't stop crying until the feelings are worked through, but all the while, they remain keenly aware of our presence and our efforts to listen.

Her mind clears

You will see at the end of a good cry that your child rather suddenly decides that all is right with the world again, and that you are the best person in it. She will laugh and shine in a relaxed and intimate way with you, her dearest friend.

I have known children to have a good cry, and then to come forth in the next few days with large numbers of new words, or with their first attempts to crawl, or with a new friendliness toward strangers. These are the kinds of significant improvements in your child's confidence and ability that your listening can foster.

While she cries, your child will appreciate your confidence that all's right with the world. She needs to know that you like her even when she feels terrible. She'll come through faster if you don't look too worried. Just offer her love and reassurance while she's crying.

Warm support can intensify her feelings

You'll be surprised at first to find that when you are being loving and reassuring in just the right ways, it will often intensify crying. It's a little like grown-ups crying at weddings: the happier the event, the harder we cry. For a child, the more love she feels at the moment, the

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harder she can cry about the hurt feelings she's shedding. Saying things like: "You are my precious one." "I'm sorry it gets this hard." "Your tummy hurts now, but it'll be over soon. " "I'll stay with you." "I see you are so upset." can help you child know that you are on her side as you listen.

Nursing can become a comfort mechanism

Sometimes in the nursing relationship, you find that your child will settle down and stop crying if you nurse her; and sometimes, she seems to ask to be "settled down" in this way. You must use your best judgment to detect whether your child wants to be fed, or is asking for escape from sadness or hurt. It's a good idea, when you think that an upset is clouding your child's outlook, to nurse her especially warmly, seeking eye contact and being openly affectionate while she's at your breast. Then, she'll know you're ready and willing to listen, and she'll finish nursing and find a way to begin a good cry.



Other times, a baby will really be hungry and at the same time be emotionally upset or in pain from teething or some other infant trouble. At these times, baby needs both nourishment and emotional release. A mother can alternate between offering the breast and listening to her child cry about the discomfort that won't let her nurse, until baby is able to relax and ease into the feeding. Crying with the benefit of your full attention eventually allows a child to relax very fully, safe in your arms and in her assurance that you've stayed with her while things were tough.

Children often need a listener to help them wean

By the time a child is walking, she will be using nursing at least occasionally as a comfort and escape from the tough times she has. This use of nursing as a comforting device is handy for us as parents. Life isn't as stormy when there's a quick "fix" for baby's sadness or the frustrations of fatigue.

But it is this use of nursing as a comfort that can interfere with a toddler's progress into independence. When you notice that your toddler is asking to nurse when she has hurt herself or can't cope, you can safely offer to listen instead. You'll want to offer as much closeness, as much intimacy, as much peace and tenderness as you would during nursing. You

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may also want to offer a cup of milk or juice, in case real thirst is present. Give lots of reassurance that you care.

Your toddler will proceed to have a good cry, and will make a definite step toward self-confidence as she gets the chance to clear out the feelings she hadn't dared to face before. A child can choose to wean from the breast, but only when she feels confident about herself and about your love. Listening to her upsets will help her make more independent decisions about who she is and what she wants to do.

Listening gives fathers a vital role to play

Fathers can play as full a role as they please in listening to their baby's upsets. Listening provides a great opportunity to build that bond of love and active caring between father and child. You'll see at the end of a good cry how fully you've moved into your child's heart simply by being openly supportive and loving in her time of trouble.

Listening fully is often not easy for fathers. It's the boys and men of our society who are most effectively prevented from asking for help when they are hurt. Long years of ignoring troubles and "going it alone" can make it hard for a father to listen to a child who is openly broadcasting her upsets. But once fathers see the warmth, affection, and obvious relief a child feels after a good cry, they are able to worry less and listen more.



Parents need a listener, too

This kind of listening is at first extremely difficult for a parent to do. It was never done for us, and so we get uneasy, sad, and quickly frustrated with our inability to lift life's hardships for our precious children. If we were abused as children, we find ourselves becoming harsh with our children when they "act up."

It's important not to try to take on the job alone. Pair up with another parent, perhaps your spouse or a friend so that you get listening time for yourself. You'll need to talk about how hard it gets for you, about the feelings that arise, and about what you are learning about your

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child and yourself as you listen. Listening to the feelings of someone of any age opens the door for us to the most tender side of a unique and important person. We are inevitably moved, and we always learn.

So get help, and experiment with listening.

Would you like some immediate help?

Sometimes it's hard to know where to start, or what to do when you meet a hurdle as you try to listen to your child. Madeleine loves to help – book a Short Free Parenting Consultation, where she can get a picture of your parenting challenges and point you in the direction of helpful resources and support. Go to

<<https://madeleinelwinter.com/courses-and-workshops/free-20-minute-consultation/>>

Parenting is not something we were meant to do alone! You deserve help and support.

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