Why Does My Baby Cry So Much?

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Perhaps the easiest way to think about early crying is to describe the features that parents don't expect. Of course, all babies cry; everyone is willing to say that. But accepting that all babies cry is one thing; accepting that they cry "like this" is another.

The first feature that really frustrates parents is that the amount of crying that happens in a day tends to increase and increase in the first two (or sometimes three) months of life. Then it reaches its highest point, and begins to decrease. This is the basic peak pattern of crying in infants. However, although they all do it, there are lots of differences between one infant and another.

For example, some infants might have their "peak" at 3 weeks of age, while others have it at 8 weeks of age. For some infants, the amount of crying that infants do at the peak might be 1 hour a day; for others, the amount of crying might be 5 hours.

In addition, we often divide overall crying into fussing, crying and inconsolable crying. Inconsolable crying is the most difficult, because (as the name implies) nothing that you do will calm your infant. For some infants, more of the overall crying will be fussing; for other infants, more of the overall crying will be inconsolable. These are all individual differences from one infant to another, and the range is pretty wide. These differences in crying behavior are very similar to differences between infants in height or weight; some are taller or heavier, and some are shorter or lighter.

But why is this crying feature so frustrating? There are two main reasons. The first is that there is probably nothing more frustrating than the fact that it gets worse and worse (as crying does in the
first couple of months) when there is nothing that you can do about it; even if it is normal! The second is that most parents do not know that this basic peak pattern will occur. If they knew ahead of time that it would get worse before it gets better, it would be easier to deal with even though it was not much fun while it was getting worse.

The second feature that parents don't expect is that some of these crying times start and stop for no apparent reason at all. They are unrelated to anything the parent does, either to begin the crying or to bring it to an end. Consequently, your baby can be completely happy and content one minute, and then a minute later can be crying out loud for minutes or even hours before it comes to an end. We are all very uncomfortable with behaviors that happen when there is no apparent reason for them happening. We like to have explanations. And we especially like to think we can influence when crying starts or, especially, stops. For many crying times, you can do that; but for some of them in the first few months of life, you can't.

The third frustrating feature is that some of these crying times include crying that is unsoothable, no matter what you do. That isn't true of all crying. But about 10% of the time, the crying can go on and on no matter what you do. If we use the distinction we made before among fussing, crying and unsoothable crying, it helps us to understand why things that you do to soothe your infant can work sometimes, and not at other times. If a baby is fussing (even for half an hour), doing something soothing will often work; but if a baby is in a period of unsoothable crying, then nothing that you do is likely to work. Alternatively, some things (like feeding your baby) may work for a few minutes, but as soon as you are finished, the crying begins again. Here is a general way of thinking about soothing: some things work some of the time, but nothing works every time.

This unsoothability feature of early infant crying is one of the most misunderstood parts of the experience for parents. Understandably, there are all kinds of advice, and sometimes even promises, available to parents that if only you do such and such a soothing method, you will be able to calm your infant. Sometimes advice articles claim that you have to find out what works for your baby, and when you do, you will be able to calm your baby. As you might expect, some of these soothing techniques will work some of the time or, in some babies, even most of the time. It is great when they do. The trouble is that they won't work all of the time, and especially when your baby is having an unsoothable crying time.

But here is the problem: if parents expect that they should be able to soothe their infants, and then the soothing fails, it can be even more frustrating. Consequently, it is very important for parents to
realize that, for some of the crying times, they will not be able to soothe their infants. But that is OK; their baby (and they) are still acting normally.

The fourth feature is that crying infants look like they are in pain, even when they are not. No wonder this is frustrating to parents. If the infant is in pain because you prick its heel, or if the infant is hungry but not in pain, the crying will look and sound similarly. Of course, if you see the infant being pricked, it is easy to understand that the infant is in pain. But if you don't see the pin prick — which is what happens most of the time — and the infant is just crying, it is very difficult to know the cause. Unfortunately, despite lots of misleading suggestions in the advice literature, there is nothing in the cry sound, in the facial expression or in the baby's activity that lets you know whether or not the infant is in pain.

We will talk more later about why we know the infant is not always in pain when it cries. (Link to Section) For now the important point is to understand that there is nothing "specific" about crying; that is, crying does not always indicate pain. Certainly, infants cry when they are in pain, but they are not always in pain when they cry. They can cry for many reasons.

The fifth feature is that crying can go on and on for long periods of time. In fact, infants cry more and for longer periods in the first three or four months than they ever do again. In one study, the average length of crying times was 35 minutes. However, the "average" includes both very long and very short crying times. In this study, the lengths of crying times were often 5 minutes and sometimes over 2 hours. As with all other features of crying, this can vary a lot between one infant and the other. But in all infants, they are likely to cry more and for longer in the first few months than they ever do again.

The sixth unexpected feature is that the increased crying tends to happen in the late afternoon and the evening. In fact, any of the features that we have talked about can occur at any time of day or night. Some infants (but not most) have a particular time of day when the increased crying seems to occur; like clockwork. However, for most infants on most days, most of the increased crying will occur in the late afternoon or evening.

This can be frustrating and misinterpreted by both mothers and fathers. Mothers or fathers may think that it has something to do with coming home from work. Mothers may feel that the infant is getting tired or bored with them; fathers may feel that their infant is doing it "on purpose." But they are not. This occurs whether or not parents work, and whether or not parents are doing everything they can think of that is right for their baby.
These are features of crying that can make parents very frustrated. However, it is worth pointing out that not all parents will experience all of these features. IF they have a relatively "quiet" baby, then they might not notice that the overall amount of crying follows a peak pattern. Some babies cry a lot for one or two days, and then not so much for the next three. Over weeks, it gradually increases, but it does not increase in a straight line. If they are lucky, and their infant only cries for one hour when it reaches its peak, then they may not have noticed the gradual increase before it goes down. They may notice some unsoothable crying, some evening clustering, and some crying that reminds them of pain, but they may not notice the peak or the prolonged crying as much. That's fine. Any one of these features, or any combination of them, can be frustrating if parents do not expect them. The main thing is to understand that they happen, that they differ from infant to infant and that, most of all, having these crying features are a completely normal part of infant behavior in the first few months of life.

Many of you have heard about the Period of PURPLE Crying, a phrase used to describe the crying of normal infants in the first weeks and months of life. The Period of PURPLE Crying is the phrase that the National Center on Shaken Baby syndrome has adopted to help capture for parents what the typical features of crying are in normal infants.