

Parent Information

Managing Unsettled Babies

Managing unsettled babies

Crying is the main way that young babies communicate with their world. All babies cry, but not all babies cry in the same way.

You might be concerned about how long your baby is crying, the intensity of the crying (it seems like they are in pain), potential physical or medical causes of crying, or how to soothe crying that just won't stop. Babies might cry when they are hungry, tired, when they have dirty nappy, when they are too hot or too cold, or sometimes for no obvious reason at all. We expect healthy babies to cry for several hours a day **without** there being any obvious pain, distress or medical cause.

Even though crying is a part of normal development, it can be extremely hard for you as a parent. Some babies can cry more than others, and are more difficult to comfort.

What is normal crying?

Newborn babies are often pretty settled in the first 2 weeks of life. Crying then increases, peaking at 6-8 weeks until about 3-4 months of age.

A healthy baby may cry for 3 hours a day between 6-8 weeks. 'High criers' cry more, 'low criers' cry less.



More information: purplecrying.info

My baby is a high crier!

For babies that are high criers:

- Crying is often worse in the late afternoon and evening
- Crying can be inconsolable, meaning nothing you do makes any difference
- Crying might start and stop for no obvious reason

Your baby may look like they are in pain (e.g. drawing up legs, back arching, going red in the face, intense screaming). These are all signs of distress and will happen when young babies are crying whether it's due to tiredness, hunger, or for no obvious reason at all.

How do I recognise if my baby is tired?

Settling to sleep is a learned skill. Babies need to learn to settle themselves to sleep.

It is important to put your baby to sleep when he is tired but not overtired. Learning to recognise your baby's tired signs and putting him down at the first sign of these is one of the most important steps.

Tired signs may include:

- Jerky movement
- Frowning
- Clenching fists
- Yawning
- Staring / poor eye contact
- Rubbing eyes
- In older babies, losing interest in toys
- Back arching, grizzling and crying are late signs of being tired!

If you find it difficult to recognise your baby's tired signs, use time as a guide. If you see 2 or 3 tired signs, especially if your baby has been awake for a while (30 minutes for a newborn or more than 90 minutes for a 3-month old), it's bedtime!

Introducing a playtime after feeds is enjoyable for babies and parents. This will mean that you're not putting an alert baby to sleep, but waiting until your baby shows signs of being tired before you put him down for a good sleep.

Settling to sleep

Settling strategies aim to help your baby to relax so she can go to sleep. This can be a combination of **swaddling, plus** either **movement** (patting, stroking, rocking in cot, jiggling the bassinet) **or sound** (rhythmical 'shush, shush', 'white noise', settling CD). Use one combination for 5 minutes before switching to the next, or until your baby is quiet but not asleep so she learns to self soothe.

- Wrapping or swaddling can help in the first 3 months, as the startle reflex (arms jerking out) can wake them up. The firm wrap also keeps your baby warm, and makes them feel secure.
- Place your baby on their back in the cot or bassinet to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Tuck in sheets at the bottom of the cot/bassinet so they cannot go over your baby's head.
- Do not use a pillow, cot bumpers, or have soft toys in the cot.
- Avoid overheating by using light layers (usually 1 more layer than you feel comfortable in).

- When you put your baby to bed, she may cry or fuss - don't rush in with settling techniques immediately; wait a few moments and give her time to fall asleep on her own.
- It's ok to use a side position if it's easier for settling (e.g. patting), but gently roll her onto her back once she has settled.

Plan A: In cot/bassinet/parent's bed settling

If you have given your baby the chance to go to sleep by himself for a few moments but he continues to cry or become more distressed, then he may need your help to settle.

- At night, try settling for a bit longer (20-30 minutes).
- Settling techniques should be gentle and rhythmic. If you find yourself trying everything at once, remember that less is more or you risk over-stimulating your baby.
- Every baby is different. YOU are the expert on what works for your baby.
- When your baby is quiet but not asleep, stop patting/rocking to allow your baby to fall asleep by himself. This means he is more likely to self-settle and have longer sleeps.
- It is ok to leave the room for 2-3 minutes if your baby has not settled after 10 minutes. If the crying continues, start again with settling strategies.
- Dummies can be very useful in the early months to help with crying and settling to sleep, but be aware that they can become a parent-dependent sleep association – you may have to go in to your baby and give the dummy back when he wakes with sleep cycles. Babies under 6-8 months usually can't find and replace the dummy by themselves.
- You may need to wean dummy use if this becomes an issue (it's often easier to wean after 4 months when baby is more settled).

Plan B: What to do if your baby does not settle

Don't worry, this is very common, especially in the first 3 months when babies are at their most unsettled, and have not yet learned self-soothing. Check if your baby needs changing, is too hot/cold or hungry (generally only if more than 2.5 hours since last feed to avoid 'snack' feeding).

Plan B for settling may be:

- A walk in the pram
- A ride in the car (but not if you are very tired).
- Carry in a sling or a carry pouch (make sure your baby's face is not covered, and that they are not curved in a 'c' shape with their chin on chest).
- Try a relaxation bath. Have the bath as warm as you would for yourself and deep enough so baby can float. Try with your baby on their back, and on their tummy with their head supported. Your baby may be upset when you take them out but more ready to sleep.
- Baby massage.
- Cuddle or rocking in your arms.

If you are feeling frustrated or angry, it is ok to leave your (crying) baby in the cot for a few minutes. Try again with Plan A next sleep! If your baby wakes after less than an hour, don't rush in to them immediately – give them the opportunity to resettle on their own for a few minutes. If your baby does not resettle themselves then try Plan A in cot settling for 20-30 minutes, then Plan B if you need to (aiming for 2.5-4 hourly feeds).

Most important – taking care of yourself!

The first few months with a new baby can be extremely tiring, both physically and emotionally. If this is your first baby, both parents can often feel overwhelmed by the lifestyle change and responsibility. Having a baby who is difficult to settle can make this emotional rollercoaster even bigger. You, as parents, are the most important people in your new baby's life, so remember to look after yourselves!

- **Accept offers of help.** Friends and family often want to help but need suggestions (e.g. bringing a meal when they visit, doing some laundry, or taking the baby for a walk so you can rest). All of these may lighten your load. Accepting help does not mean you have to accept the advice others have about how to manage your baby.
- **Make your sleep/rest a priority.** A new baby is 24 hour day job. You need to sleep/rest during the day while your baby is still waking for night feeds. When your baby settles, head straight for your rest – don't delay as your baby may be up again and you will have missed out! Plan to do most of your housework before midday as crying/fussing is often worse in the afternoon.
- **Eat well and drink plenty of fluids** (especially if breast feeding). You won't have much time to cook so have plenty of snacks on hand. Take advantage of local shops that deliver or shop on the Internet.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope, **ask for extra help** from a trusted friend or family member, and talk to your doctor or Maternal and Child Health Nurse about the way you're feeling.

