**LETTING BABY "CRY-IT-OUT" YES, NO!**

If only my baby could talk instead of cry I would know what she wants," said Janet, a new mother of a fussy baby. "Your baby can talk," we advised. "The key is for you to learn how to listen. When you learn the special language of your baby's cry, you will be able to respond sensitively. Here are some listening tips that will help you discover what your baby is trying to say when he cries.

The cry is not just a sound; it's a signal – designed for the survival of the baby and development of the parents. By not responding to the cry, babies and parents lose. Here's why. In the early months of life, babies cannot verbalize their needs. To fill in the gap until the child is able to "speak our language," babies have a unique language called "crying." Baby senses a need, such as hunger for food or the need to be comforted when upset, and this need triggers a sound we call a cry. Baby does not ponder in his little mind, "It's 3:00 a.m. and I think I'll wake up mommy for a little snack." No! That faulty reasoning is placing an adult interpretation on a tiny infant. Also, babies do not have the mental acuity to figure out why a parent would respond to their cries at three in the afternoon, but not at three in the morning. The newborn who cries is saying: "I need something; something is not right here. Please make it right."

At the top of the list of unhelpful advice – one that every new parent is bound to hear – is "Let your baby cry-it-out." To see how unwise and unhelpful is this advice, let's analyze each word in this mother-baby connection- interfering phrase.

"Let your baby." Some third-party advisor who has no biological connection to your baby, no knowledge or investment in your baby, and isn't even there at 3:00 a.m. when your baby cries, has the nerve to pontificate to you how to respond to your baby's cries.

The cry is a marvelous design. Consider what might happen if the infant didn't cry. He's hungry, but doesn't awaken ("He sleeps through the night," brags the parent of a sleep-trained baby). He hurts, but doesn't let anyone know. The result of this lack of communication is known, ultimately, as "failure to thrive." "Thriving" means not only getting bigger, but growing to your full potential emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

"Cry…" Not only is the cry a wonderful design for babies; it is a useful divine design for parents, especially the mother. When a mother hears her baby cry, the blood flow to her breasts increases, accompanied by the biological urge to "pick up and nurse" her baby. ("Nurse" means comforting, not just breastfeeding.) As an added biological perk, the maternal hormones released when baby nurses relax the mother, so she gives a less tense and more nurturing response to her infant's needs. These biological changes – part of the design of the mother-baby communication network – explain why it's easy for someone else to advise you to let your baby cry, but difficult for you to do. That counterproductive advice is not biologically correct.

"It…" Consider what exactly is the "it" in "cry-it-out": an annoying habit? Unlikely, since babies don't enjoy crying. And, contrary to popular thought, crying is not "good for baby's lungs." That belief is not physiologically correct. The "it" is an emotional or physical need. Something is not right and the only way baby has of telling us this is to cry, pleading with us to make it right. Early on, consider baby's cry as signaling a need – communication rather than manipulation.

Parent tip: Babies cry to communicate – not manipulate

"Out" What actually goes "out" of a baby, parents, and the relationship when a baby is left to cry-it-out? Since the cry is a baby's language, a communication tool, a baby has two choices if no one listens. Either he can cry louder, harder, and produce a more disturbing signal or he can clam up and become a "good baby" (meaning "quiet"). If no one listens, he will become a very discouraged baby. He'll learn the one thing you don't want him to: that he can't communicate.

Baby loses trust in the signal value of his cry – and perhaps baby also loses trust in the responsiveness of his caregivers. Not only does something vital go "out" of baby, an important ingredient in the parent- child relationship goes "out" of parents: sensitivity. When you respond intuitively to your infant's needs, as you practice this cue- response listening skill hundreds of times in the early months, baby learns to cue better (the cries take on a less disturbing and more communicative quality as baby learns to "talk better"). On the flip side of the mother-infant communication, you learn to read your infant's cries and respond appropriately (meaning when to say "yes" and when to say "no," and how fast). In time you learn the ultimate in crying sensitivity: to read baby's body language and respond to her pre-cry signals so baby doesn't always have to cry to communicate her needs.

What happens if you "harden your heart," view the cry as a control rather than a communication tool and turn a deaf ear to baby's cries? When you go against your basic biology, you desensitize yourself to your baby's signals and your instinctive responses. Eventually, the cry doesn't bother you. You lose trust in your baby's signals, and you lose trust in your ability to understand baby's primitive language. A distance develops between you and your baby and you run the risk of becoming what pediatricians refer to as a doctor-tell-me-what-to-do. You listen to a book instead of your baby. So, not listening and responding sensitively to baby's cries is a lose-lose situation: Baby loses trust in caregivers and caregivers lose trust in their own sensitivity.

Mother loses trust in herself. To illustrate how a mother can weaken her God- given sensitivity when she lets herself be less discerning about parenting advice; a sensitive veteran mother recently shared this story with us:

"I went to visit my friend who just had a baby. While we were talking, her three-week-old started crying in another room. The baby kept crying, harder and louder. I was getting increasingly driven to go comfort the baby. Her baby's cries didn't bother her, but they bothered me. My breasts almost started to leak milk! Yet, my friend seemed oblivious to her baby's signals. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and I said, 'It's okay, go attend to your baby. We can talk later.' Matter-of-factly she replied, 'No, it's not time yet for his feeding.' Incredulous, I asked, 'Mary, where on earth did you get that harmful advice?' 'From a baby-training class at church,' she proudly insisted. 'I want my baby to learn I'm in control, not him.'"

This novice mother, wanting to do the best for her baby and believing she was being a good mother, had allowed herself to succumb to uncredentialed prophets of bad parenting advice and was losing her God-given sensitivity to her baby. She was starting her parenting career with a distance developing between her and her baby. The pair was becoming disconnected.

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