

Ask the pediatrician: How can parents help babies learn to calm themselves?

November 8 2021, by Patti Ideran and Dr. Mark Fishbein



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Q: My baby cries a lot and I want to help her calm herself. How do I do this?

A: In discussions about helping [babies](#) learn to fall asleep on their own, you may hear "self-soothing" mentioned a lot. The term can sometimes be interpreted as a parent making a baby "cry it out" or ignoring their cries. This is absolutely not true.

Allowing babies to learn calming strategies gives them an important life skill. Leading by example and teaching good coping skills from the beginning helps babies become happy, well-adjusted children.

Teaching how to self-soothe involves a learning curve for you as well as your baby. If your baby is extremely irritable, for example, they may be hungry (and then you need to feed them) or very tired (and then you need to try to help them sleep). If you think your baby is in pain, you need to address that.

If all of these are ruled out and your baby is fed, changed and well-rested but fussy, then you can try a progression of calming techniques listed below.

Too often, when your baby is crying (which may seem like all the time!), you may have the instinct to immediately pick them up. Instead, next time try slow down and take steps to really learn about your baby and what they need. Try each technique slowly and be sure to pause to see how your baby responds.

The order of the progression is important because you are doing less at the beginning by just using your voice and more at the end when you are holding and possibly feeding your baby. The goal is for your baby to calm with less intervention from you, and for you to move away from holding your baby all day, which happens frequently with fussy babies.

Here is the CALM Baby Method progression:

- Look at your baby.
- Look at your baby and talk to them.
- Put a hand on their belly or chest.
- Hold their arms toward the body or curl their legs up toward their belly.
- Roll them onto their side (only when awake).
- Pick up your baby and hold them at your shoulder, but don't move yet.
- Hold and rock your baby.
- Swaddle your baby and rock them.
- Place a pacifier in their mouth or assist them to get their hand or thumb to their mouth.
- Feed them, if you think this will help.

Other strategies you can incorporate include massaging their back while you are holding them, singing to them, walking with them and using white noise. When babies are extremely fussy, we tend to try many things to help them calm. But sometimes this means we are adding more stimulation to an already overwhelmed sensory system, and this can backfire. When babies are inconsolable, we advise parents to try one strategy for about five minutes before moving on the next. This allows your baby to process the sensations and gives them time to settle.

Other things you can try include standing up and holding your baby firmly while they are sucking on a pacifier, shushing or patting them, and swaddling and rocking them. Just don't attempt all the strategies at once or in too quickly in a row, or they will get overstimulated. You can also try decreasing the intensity of the interaction; talk more quietly, move more slowly, use less animation in your face. Try to stick with one method for five minutes; if it does not help your baby calm, move on to a different strategy and give that one five minutes. Every time your baby cries, try the strategy, and do this for at least a day to see if it helps your baby to make a change. If you feel like a certain strategy works some of

the time, try that one first.

As babies get older, their cries change, and so should your strategies to help them calm. Sometimes parents find a [strategy](#) that works well with their baby, such as doing squats with their baby in their arms, that is much more difficult to do with an older, heavier baby. Be open to trying something different that may be more suitable or safer for your baby as they grow.

If you and your baby are still frustrated, more resources can help. Consider contacting a pediatric occupational therapist who specializes in treating infants, an infant mental health specialist, or a pediatric developmental psychologist. These professionals can help you understand your baby, help you learn how to read their cues, and help you promote self-regulation.

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