

WHEN I'M UPSET

Speaking for the Baby x SMS4dads Campaign

Babies cry to communicate that they are upset or feeling bad. They are good at letting us know they need something! Babies cry from Day 1 but crying usually peaks around 6-8 weeks of age.

Young babies most commonly cry when they are hungry, wet, tired or in pain. If you have checked all of these and their cries continue it can be tough to figure out what to do and how to help. During these times, it is important to remember that even when it feels annoying, your baby is not trying to annoy you.

They are not trying to give you a hard time, they are having a hard time, and they need your help. So, you might ask, what can you do?

How to help your baby even if you can't stop the crying

Dads may think there is nothing they can do to help their crying baby. While you may not be able to stop the crying, there are absolutely things you can do – things to help your baby feel safe and reassured.

Sometimes babies feel frightened, overwhelmed and out of control. Feeling strong emotions when you are a brand new person who doesn't know a lot about the world can be frightening. And for you as the dad, it can also be distressing for you when you see how distressed your baby is – it is hard not to be affected by it. But this is when you can help your baby manage their distress by showing her that you get it. You acknowledge that she is really upset by the look on your face, the way that you speak, by moving closer. Giving your baby the message that you recognise how she is feeling and you are not going to run away helps her feel safe. Of course, your baby will also need you to soothe her by holding her, swaddling her, speaking gently with her, rocking her and any other strategies that work to calm her. But as you do these things if you are thinking how it is for her (and not just “I wish she'd stop!”) and empathise with her, this will help her get in control of her distress.

Your efforts to ease the crying may not bring about a completely quiet baby – she may remain distressed. At these times, your understanding and hanging in there with her can be very reassuring, and builds trust between you even when she remains distressed.

The very important message that she is getting is you will not leave her alone to deal with her difficult feelings.

Soothe me when I'm upset, Dad

Dad I cry for lots of reasons, it's how I communicate. Sometimes you won't know why I'm crying. I am not trying to annoy you, I just need something and I need your help. Talk to me gently, your voice will soothe me. Holding and comforting me will help me to feel safe and I might be able to get it under control Dad.



Oh, this is tough! I'm here with you, bub

Tolerating your baby's distressing feelings, as well as your own, helps her cope. If she repeatedly experiences your ability to identify with her distress and to tolerate it, she comes to learn that distress can be tolerated. Containing her this way helps her learn to contain and soothe herself over time. She learns that it is possible to tolerate the distress she is experiencing which helps her feel safe. She learns that bad feelings pass and good feelings can return.

Leave yourself as open as possible to understand what she is communicating and then respond. This gives your baby the experience of being understood and comforted. This is containing for her.

Written by A/Prof Richard Fletcher and Dr Bronwyn Leigh for SMS4dads and the Centre for Perinatal Psychology.

Illustrations by Jess Racklyeft for the Speaking for the Baby Campaign.

