

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller

Crying

Many infant caregivers list dealing with children's crying as one of their greatest challenges. Listening to a baby cry is one of the most distressing things for adults. There is instinct at work here. We are programmed to try to stop the crying. Thus the species has survived! When it is not possible to stop a baby's crying, or when several of them are crying at once, our stress builds.

Young babies cry because of discomfort, usually hunger or gastric pain. There may be other discomfort, such as from urine irritation of a wet diaper or illness. So it is a physical calling out that something is wrong . . . please fix it.

When adults respond promptly, and with the appropriate comfort, to a young baby's cries, he learns "basic trust" — that someone is out there to comfort and care for him. While some people may hesitate to "spoil" babies by picking them up when they cry and otherwise comforting them, there has been research that shows that when young babies are comforted promptly they are

more patient and compliant later on and can put off immediate gratification a little longer.

Try to figure out why the baby is crying and respond appropriately. You will gradually learn to differentiate the different cries of each infant in your care. Talk to the baby. Although it may seem

silly, talking to the baby about her crying is in itself comforting. Go over to the baby and let her see your face. Say something like, "Oh, Sadie . . . I hear you are crying. Something is making you uncomfortable. I wonder what it is. Let's see . . . you were just fed, so I don't think you are hungry. No . . . your diaper is

not wet. Maybe you want to be in a different position. I will put you on your side and see if that helps."

Infants also seem to cry just to exercise their lungs, experiencing a fussy period at certain times of day . . . often right



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Dear Reader,

Reading over Alyssa Lang's description of caring for her own child in a group child care situation ("Thriving, Thank You!" page 34), I find that she also addresses a broad range of quality issues that all work together to make her situation work well.

- It is obvious that she has a very supportive director and staff. When people value each other, they find ways to work creatively to solve problems. Teamwork and open communication, crucial to any quality program, are mentioned as key to success.
- Even though it caused some initial challenges, they learned the value of "continuity of care" — working with different ages and moving up with babies. Aside from the obvious advantage to the children of having a caregiver over a longer period of time, there is the definite value of mutual respect, gaining the perspective of co-workers.
- Alyssa demonstrates an important respect for infants when she talks to them and reassures them while caring for another baby — one of the greatest challenges of working with infants in groups.
- There is an awareness of the adjustment period of babies and caregivers. The

before dinner as soon as the stressed parent arrives at home and has a million things to do! Some babies are quite “regular” in their “fussy” times and you can predict them. Others are more difficult to predict. Some infants need to cry before they go to sleep. Some wake up with a cry. Talk to the parents to get insight into the different crying patterns of each particular baby. Also get clues from parents of how their child is best comforted.

As infants develop, they learn to use crying as a cause and effect tool. It’s what they do to make the magic face appear. Toward the middle of the first year, it becomes a social “doorbell.” It is certainly behind the cry of anger or frustration . . . “Someone get over here and help me get what I want!” In that sense, it is a cognitive development as well as a language development.

Remember that crying is a baby’s first communication. It’s important to acknowledge that babies have a *right* to cry. While we should respond to an infant’s cries and try to figure out if we can alleviate the discomfort that is causing the cry, we must avoid the tendency to stop the crying at all costs. Renowned infant specialist Magna Gerber cautions that it should not be our primary goal to stop a baby from crying. By always stopping the crying, we communicate that it is not okay to have a full range of feelings. (But don’t stand there like a zombie when you know and can relieve the cause.) Many people automatically “plug in” a baby when she cries, by feeding her or putting something like a pacifier in her mouth. (This may be the root cause of overeating to relieve emotional stress in adulthood.) Others lull the child into an altered state of consciousness by placing him in a wind-up swing, which can be quite habit forming for a child.

When older infants cry at separation, there is grief, fear, and anger all at once. As you comfort the child, acknowledge what she is feeling, don’t discount it. Instead of automatically saying, “You’ll be fine,” and trying to distract the child, say, “Yes . . . it’s hard to be away from Mommy. I’m here to take good care of you and be with you until she comes back.” (Even if the child doesn’t exactly understand your words, the comforting message will be communicated.) Let the child cling to you, and sit quietly holding the child until she climbs out of your lap on her own, ready to take in what the day has to offer her. Other children learn from this as well, and you may even see an empathetic response from another child who may bring over a blanket or otherwise try to comfort the child. They learn this by example.

Remember the empathetic response. Even when several children are crying at once and you are busy and cannot attend to them, you can acknowledge their distress and begin to comfort them with your voice. You can even apologize! “Yes, Michael . . . I hear you. You are hungry. I’m sorry I cannot help you right this second but as soon as I finish with Katie I will come over and help you.”

Do remember that infants do not cry to bother adults. When you are appropriately responsive to the different reasons for crying, either by picking the baby up, feeding the baby, changing a diaper, moving the baby, putting the baby to bed, or otherwise comforting the child, you teach the child that she *matters*. Infants learn that they can communi-

child bonds to a primary caregiver first (in this case, her mother) but gradually becomes comfortable with the other consistent caregivers in the environment. Alyssa mentions that the teachers needed to get to know the baby, too — meaning learning how to read her cues, her rhythms, her temperament.

- Alyssa is very conscious of the feelings of other parents. As we well know, parent jealousy is not uncommon, even when you do not have your own child in the program.
- She mentions the importance of helping the teachers she supervises keep learning and finds way for them to gain competence.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, Alyssa. You’ve given us much to think about!

Karen Miller is author of *Ages and Stages*, *Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *The Outside Play and Learning Book*, and her new book, *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House).

Open Discussion

Thriving, Thank You!

by Alyssa Lang



In our March/April “Open Discussion” section, Tonja Deviney, who was expecting a baby, asked for tips about including one’s own child in a program where you are currently working. Alyssa Lang, who is the infant coordinator at Good Shepherd Center in Iowa City, sent us this delightful picture and response.

My daughter is now eight months old and has been in my room at our day care center since she was six weeks old. I have been the infant/toddler coordinator in the nursery at our center

for four years. Up until I had my baby, I worked in the toddler room all day long while also supervising the infant room. When my daughter and I returned to work, I started working in the infant room while supervising the toddler room. With the help of a very supportive director, nursery staff, and the parents, it has worked out beautifully.

The trickiest part for us was the switching of teachers' roles (infant room to toddler room and vice versa). While it has taken lots of teamwork and open communication to work through these changing job duties, it has really helped us all see how "the other half lives" and get a good perspective by walking in the other person's shoes.

As far as my daughter is concerned, things could not have worked out more nicely. She very easily learned that I could still meet her needs, even though I had two other babies' needs to meet and 11 other children to supervise. I often verbalize to her, just as I do with the other children, what I am doing with a

certain baby now (feeding, diapering, playing) and assure her that soon it will be her turn. She has never minded sharing me or my time. She actually demands more of my time at home because she doesn't have her friends to socialize with at our house.

The hardest part for her in the first month or two was getting accustomed to other teachers taking care of her when I was frequently in and out of the room supervising the toddler room or at meetings or conferences. Once she got to know the teachers and they got to know her, everything was fine.

There are many great benefits of my daughter attending the day care center in which I work. I have been able to nurse my baby all the time. This has kept her very, very healthy for these eight months. While all the other children have had flu viruses, ear infections, and so on, my daughter and I have been here at work, healthy every day. Of course, I don't have any extra before or after work day

care drop-off and pick-up time. I also know first hand what quality care my baby is receiving. The best part is that I get to spend most of my day with my daughter and her super friends.

There are certainly things to be careful about when your child is in your room. Be sure that you are doing your job meeting the other children's needs and not only taking care of your child. Also be very aware that some parents may be extremely jealous of you because you get to be at work and with your child at the same time.

As the nursery coordinator and a mother with a child in this program, I try to strive harder to help my teachers become more educated and even better at what they do. My child is affected by all of us!

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas, as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to: Karen Miller, PO Box 97, Cowdrey, CO 80434.