



## Handout 20

# Crying in babies and young children

### Why do babies cry?

Crying is one of the baby's first expressions of communication to its parents or carers. The sound of a baby's or toddler's cry can make parents feel anxious but it is designed to get a parent to respond to their needs. Sometimes parents and carers can feel they are being controlled by their baby's or toddler's crying or that they are crying for no good reason. However, babies do cry for different reasons such as boredom, tiredness, loneliness, hunger, frustration, being too hot, too cold or sudden changes in environment.

Parents and carers have the difficult task of learning this baby language and working out what the crying means. They will have to listen carefully, learn to differentiate the cries and what these mean, and then to work out what response is required. With practice, this becomes easier.

### Different approaches – what's the evidence?

There are different ideas about how to handle a baby who has been crying for a long time. The advice to leave a baby to cry is now thought to be inadvisable. Contrary to some beliefs, babies and toddlers are not able to control their parents because their brains have not developed enough to think this through.

Researchers found that in societies where babies are immediately responded to with lots of physical contact when they cry, they actually spend less time crying than babies from elsewhere whose parents leave babies to cry for longer.

Research carried out into infant crying showed that mothers who responded promptly to their baby's crying in infancy went on to have one year olds who cried less than other babies.

Sometimes babies cry for a long time because they are distressed and the longer a baby is left to cry, the more time it is exposed to stress. Scientific studies show that prolonged states of distress cause permanent and negative changes in babies' brains. One of the effects is that a baby will go on to view the world with insecurity, anxiety and a sense of being threatened, even during times that are actually safe and peaceful.

### How to respond and soothe

Distressed babies and toddlers need comforting and soothing so that the brain and body can be calmed, brought into balance and become more relaxed. Warm and caring responses to the baby increase the closeness and bond between them and their parents or carers. Repeated comforting and soothing also help a baby to comfort and soothe him/herself in the future when things get stressful in life.

There are different ways to comfort and soothe a baby, for example by picking up, stroking, talking softly, rocking or massaging.