

# Be the Best Nanny

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## Why is the Baby Crying? The happiest baby on the block.

By Harvey Karp, M.D.

In the early 1900's baby experts taught new parents to do the following when their infant cried: 1) feed them, 2) burp them, 3) change their diaper, and 4) check for an open safety pin. Authorities proclaimed that when these didn't work babies had colic and there was nothing else an adult could do.

But, for caregivers of a frantic newborn, the nothing-you-can-do advice is intolerable. Few impulses are as powerful as the desire to calm a crying baby. The frustrating reality is while we instinctively want to calm babies, knowing how to do it is anything but instinctive. It's a skill. Luckily it is a skill that is fairly easy to learn.

Reflexes are your body's way of reacting automatically, such as blinking before something hits your eye, or shooting out your arms when you are knocked off balance. All reflexes have the following characteristics: 1) they are reliable, 2) they are automatic, and 3) they require specific triggering action. The trigger for the baby's **calming reflex** are the sensations she felt in the uterus.

The most effective body calming methods can be grouped into five baby categories that I call the 5 "S's": 1) swaddling, 2) side/stomach position, 3) shhhhing sounds, 4) swinging, and 5) sucking. These 5 qualities of the uterus help activate the calming reflex if done properly.

1. **Swaddling:** Tight swaddling is the cornerstone of calming, the essential step in soothing a fussy baby. Wrapping makes a baby feel magically returned to the womb and satisfies his longing for the continuous touching and tight fit of the uterus. This "S" doesn't actually trigger the calming reflex but it keeps your baby from flailing and helps him pay attention to the other "S's," which do activate the reflex.

Many irritable babies resist wrapping. However, it's a mistake to think this resistance mean the baby needs her hands free. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fussy young babies lack the coordination to control their arm flailing, so if their arms are unwrapped they make themselves even more upset.

2. **Side/Stomach Position:** Swaddling stops the baby's uncontrolled arm and leg acrobatics that can lead into frenzied crying. In a similar fashion, the side/stomach position stops an equally upsetting but invisible type of stimulation — the panicky feeling of falling!

Being dropped was such a serious threat to our

ancient relatives that their babies developed a special alarm—the **Moro reflex**— that went off the moment they felt they were falling out of their mother's arms.

Most babies are content to be on their backs if they're in a good mood. However, when the baby is crying, putting him on his back may make him feel like he's free falling. That in turn can set off his **Moro**. That's why the side and stomach are the perfect feel-good positions for fussy babies. When it comes to putting a small one to sleep, however, the back is the safest position for all babies. Unless the pediatrician instructs you otherwise, *no baby should ever be put to sleep on her stomach*.

3. **Shhhhing: A Baby's Favorite Soothing Sound:** Believe it or not, a loud, harsh shushing sound is music to a baby's ears. Shhhhing comforts a baby by mimicking the whooshing noise of blood flowing through the mother's arteries. This rough humming surrounded the baby every moment during his nine months inside his mother.

Many caregivers mistakenly believe their babies prefer the gentle tinkling sounds of a brook or the distant hush of the wind. That's why many books recommend the use of roaring appliances to settle screaming infants. The louder the baby cries the louder the shhhhing has to be in order to calm her down.

4. **Swinging:** Lying on a soft, motionless bed may appeal to you, but to a baby — just out of the womb— it's disorienting and unnatural. Rhythmic, monotonous, jiggly movement — what I call swinging — is one of the most common methods parents have always used to calm their babies. Swinging usually must be vigorous at first to get a baby to stop screaming, and then it can be reduced to a gentler motion to keep him calm.

5. **Sucking:** Once a cranky baby starts to settle down from the swaddle, side position, shushing, and swinging, she's ready for the fifth glorious "S": sucking. It takes a baby who is beginning to quiet and lulls her into a deep and profound state of tranquility. Obviously, it's hard to cry or scream with a pacifier in her mouth. Sucking releases natural chemicals within her brain which lead to a rich and satisfying level of relaxation.

Your skill in using the 5 "S's" will increase with practice.

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