

Tips for Talking with Parents and Caregivers

Parents want to do a good job. No one wants to hurt their baby. But parents need information, skills, and support. Talk about normal crying, teach ways to cope, and help parents make a plan for the hard times.

Begin with a framing statement that tells parents what you're going to be talking about in a way that does not blame or stigmatize them or make them think you suspect them of child abuse.

- "We are talking with all parents about infant crying and handling the stress of caring for a baby."
- "You can't spoil a baby. Babies need a lot of attention and love. It's a big job and can be exhausting."

Acknowledge that it is difficult to take care of babies, especially if they cry a lot.

- "Babies are wonderful, but it's exhausting to take care of them."
- "It's surprising how hard it can be to take care of one little baby."
- "Some babies cry a lot, and some babies are difficult to comfort. The sound of crying is very hard to listen to."
- "Some babies hardly ever cry, but some cry for hours at a time, and no one knows why."
- "When a baby cries a lot or is difficult to comfort, it can be very frustrating for the parents or anyone who is taking care of the baby. The sound of a baby crying is one of the most irritating sounds there is."
- "Many parents say crying is the hardest thing about taking care of a baby."
- "Most of the time, you can figure out what your baby needs to stop crying. But sometimes babies cry, even cry for hours at a time, and no one can figure out what they need or how to comfort them."
- "Even good parents, even experienced parents, will sometimes not be able to help their baby stop crying."

Offer practical help for coping with crying. Demonstrate and teach swaddling and burping, and show the parents how to hold the baby upright on the parent's shoulder. Bring a cloth baby carrier and show the parents how to use it.

- "Here are some ideas for comforting your baby when he cries."
- "Babies cry less if they are held and carried a lot."
- "There are a lot of things you can try if your baby's crying. This brochure from the Department of Public Health has a lot of ideas. As you get to know your baby, you will learn what works for her."

Tell them it's normal for parents to become frustrated or angry, and that the safe thing to do is put the baby down until the adult is calm. Advise that they leave the room but not the apartment, and check on the baby periodically. Also ask them to check on themselves and know their own level of frustration.

- "If you get frustrated or angry, put the baby down and take a break."
- "It's smart to know when you just can't deal with your baby anymore. If you find yourself feeling angry at the baby, or getting really frustrated, just put your baby down in a safe place and take a break."
- "It can help to take a break from the sound of crying when you feel like you just can't stand it anymore. Here are some ideas in this brochure, like putting the baby down on her back in a safe place, and listening to music on headphones or taking a shower, until you feel calm."
- "After a little while, check on the baby and check on yourself. Are you ready to pick the baby up? Don't pick up a baby when you're angry."

Offer ideas for coping with the stress of parenting and emphasize that all parents need some support. Help the parent make a plan.

- *"Every parent needs some help and support. You might want to think about who you can call to talk to when you're having a rough day. Let's write down who you might call and their phone number. How about your mom or dad? Friends who have babies?"*
- *"The Parents Helping Parents Stress Line is a free confidential hotline and parents can call any time just to talk to someone sympathetic. Their phone number is 1-800-632-8188."*
- *"Most people find getting out of the house every day helps. Even taking a long walk with the baby in the stroller or sling helps. You might want to see if your city has a Family Network, a mom's group, or parent and baby storytime at a public library. Do you know of anything like that near here?"*

Calmly and clearly explain the dangers of shaking.

- *"Some people have lost their tempers and shaken a baby. You might have seen this in the newspapers. Remember, no matter what happens, never shake or hit the baby. Shaking a baby, even for a few seconds, can cause brain damage or death very quickly."*

If a parent discloses that they have shaken a baby, explain carefully how shaking damages the brain:

- *"Even though some babies seem okay after they're shaken, shaking makes the brain slam against the inside of the skull and can cause bruising and bleeding, and lead to permanent brain damage. Now that you know how dangerous it is, let's talk about how to make sure that doesn't happen again. Do you remember what made you so frustrated?"*
- *"Some people shake a baby to get his attention or make him stop crying. They don't realize they are hurting the baby because there's no blood or broken bones. But shaking causes bleeding inside the skull where you can't see it and can cause permanent brain damage."*

If a parent says that she saw her own mother or father shake a baby when she herself was growing up, explain carefully how shaking damages the brain:

- *"We know more now. Your parents probably didn't know that any shaking causes bleeding inside the skull where you can't see it and can cause permanent brain damage. Let's figure out other ways you can plan on handling the stress if your baby cries a lot."*

If a parent says that she saw someone else she knows shake their baby recently... speak to your supervisor about what to do.

Help parents make good choices about leaving their babies with other people.

- *"When you leave your baby with someone else, call while you are out and check on how things are going. Make sure the person taking care of the baby can always reach you."*
- *"When you are looking for a daycare provider, ask how they cope with a baby who can't stop crying."*
- *"When a babysitter or someone else in the family takes care of your baby, take time to teach them. Show them how the baby likes to be held, what helps her fall asleep, and what comforts her when she is unhappy. Let them know if they become angry or very frustrated, it's okay to put the baby down on her back in a safe place for a few minutes in order to calm down."*
- *"Don't leave your baby with someone who has a history of violence or angry outbursts."*

