

# How Will You Respond When Your Baby Cries?

*Experts in infant mental health explain why a baby's first relationships are so important to life-long psychological well-being.*

By **Claire Charlton** - February 1, 2021

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In the whirlwind first weeks with your new baby, when days and nights become a blur of feedings and diapers and you wonder when life might return to normal, something very important is happening — perhaps even without your knowledge. Your child's mental health is beginning to develop. And, as you — and other caregivers in your baby's life — listen to, acknowledge and respond to your baby's needs, you're helping your baby become a healthier toddler, preschooler, teenager and successful adult.

"Research tells us that when children are securely attached to their caregiver, they are more likely to have long-term, trusting relationships with others. It means they have better self-esteem, are more likely to seek out support when they need it and are more likely to trust others," says Joni Zieldorff, endorsement and training coordinator with the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health ([MI-AIMH](#)).

When babies express their needs and are responded to in an appropriate and timely manner, they develop trust through what mental health experts call a feedback cycle. "This happens throughout a thousand interactions over the course of a day, and more often than not, if a baby's needs are met, they are more likely to develop a working model of trust in their caregivers that their needs will be met," explains Sheryl Goldberg, executive director with MI-AIMH.

These baby-caregiver relationships are important because they form a foundation for all future relationships for the child. What happens in these early days creates a prototype that is developed in 12 to 18 months and can determine how secure a toddler feels in exploring

their world. While children certainly bring their own personalities and temperaments to the relationship, attachment styles and prototype developments are powerful and persist, says Goldberg.



“If a toddler is more secure, they’re more likely to be able to explore and look to the parent and confirm that they are OK, that everything is OK and they are safe to move on,” she says. “Children who are secure are most ready to engage with adults and peers and approach new learning experiences more easily.”

## Authenticity, not perfection

The demands of modern life create busy parents who may have competing challenges, circumstances and influences that make prompt and consistent responses to their baby’s needs difficult. Keeping things in perspective may help. “You’re not aiming for perfection. What you’re aiming for is the concept of good enough or most of the time,” Zieldorff says. “When you respond promptly most of the time when your infant shows you they are hungry or need attention, they learn they can count on you.”

When your hands are busy preparing dinner, for instance, your response may be talking to your child and acknowledging their feelings and their need, even if you aren’t available at that exact moment, Zieldorff says. “Our littlest ones are always listening, so you can talk to them and say ‘I hear you say you are hungry and I’m almost ready,’” she explains.

That verbal attention, in itself a form of response, is important for a child’s speech and language development, communication skills, and emotion regulation abilities. “Talk to your child about what you are doing during routine care, when you’d normally space out or make a shopping list in your head,” Goldberg suggests. “During baths or when feeding, make eye contact and talk or sing. This is one way to build your baby’s experiences of interaction. Fill their cup. Can you be more attentive in these moments? Not everyone can set aside quality time, but maybe you can make the most of these times.”

And, as your child grows, you’ll recognize when their need is immediate and determine how best to balance competing demands. There’s value in that honest reflection, Zieldorff says. “Growth happens when the parent isn’t perfect and when a parent can rewind and repair the situation with their child. It’s OK to say ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help you, but I needed to be on my own for a few minutes,’” she says. “This teaches them how we want

them to interact with others later in life. It's important to repair and talk about things when they're not going perfectly. It's a good lesson early on."

## The payoff

Strong and trusting relationships from birth on provide children with physically and psychologically healthier adult lives. "There is recent research that shows that brain development — including the emotional and social system — is dependent on experiences," Goldberg says. Experiences — good and bad — stimulate the biochemical processes that impact brain structure, so what happens to a child very early in life can impact their lifelong well-being.

Children who know they can trust their caregivers are more capable of managing setbacks and stressors later in life, Goldberg says, adding that caregivers who are sensitive and responsive are more important in the early years than a focus on academic development, for instance. "We should not only nurture children with nourishing food, but with nourishing interactions from a child's mother or childcare provider or grandparent. It's really important," she says.

To have the physical and emotional reserves to provide responsive care to your infant, both experts stress the importance of self-care. "Rest, exercise, eat well and connect with others as a support system," Zieldorff says. "Caring for young children can be exhausting, so if you are not doing things to support yourself, you won't be as responsive as you'd like to be. It's important to know that it's OK to ask for help."

## Some resources

- Parents who qualify for Medicaid are entitled to receive maternal infant health visits to check in during baby's earliest days. Learn more at [michigan.gov/mihp](https://michigan.gov/mihp) or call 833-644-6447.
- Find tips for a variety of early parenting issues at [zerotothrive.org](https://zerotothrive.org).
- Learn more about your baby's development at [healthychildren.org](https://healthychildren.org), including [these tips](#) to promote social-emotional health.
- Visit Brazelton Touchpoints Center at [brazeltontouchpoints.org](https://brazeltontouchpoints.org).

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