

Newborn Soothing and Sleep

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The ability to sleep and stay asleep is already an advantage, even in the newborn period. This will be more likely for a baby who can shut out outside disturbances and who can get her hand up to her mouth to suck and soothe.

Parents whose baby adapts easily by using her own abilities to self-soothe and be soothed are fortunate. Their baby's cycles of light and deep sleep, waking, feeding, and descent into sleep again may come easily, and by 4 weeks the cycles may fit into a 3- or 4-hour pattern that adapts to parents' days and nights. An active, vigorously responsive baby may be at the other end of the scale. She may be difficult to soothe and easy to rouse, and she may find it difficult to pay attention. These infants can be "taught" over time to control these states, but this can mean a longer, more difficult adjustment for parents.

Ways to Help a Baby Calm Herself

- * Swaddling half the body—the lower half.
- * Helping her to find her thumb or her fist—to teach her hand-to-mouth maneuvers.
- * Offering a pacifier for sucking.
- * Rocking her and singing to her.
- * Carrying the baby on the mother's (or father's) chest.
- * Quietly putting the baby down, singing to her.
- * Using a continuous sound, such as the noise of a washing machine.
- * Sleeping her on her back, but slightly propped at a small angle to one side to cut down on startles.

Soothing an Active Baby

An active, easily disturbed baby often has difficulty finding her thumb or a comforting position. As she awakens and fusses, she startles. The startles set off crying and uncontrolled activity. The activity sets off more startles. A vicious cycle of activity and crying is set in motion. Parents are driven to pick the baby up, to bounce her up and down, to swaddle her, to try all sorts of remedies, even placing the baby seat on the washing machine, or driving over rough roads. The baby's frantic activity is matched by her parents! But as soon as the parents' efforts stop, the baby is likely to rouse again, more worn out than before. Already, temperament is beginning to play an important role for parents and infant.

Active, easily stimulated babies can also be fed more often to try to soothe them. They may cry and gulp air down so that they need more frequent burping. It is important not to overstimulate such babies. Think of them as having a sensitive, easily overloaded nervous system. Creating a soothing, quiet environment can be a help. It is difficult for a parent not to feel like a failure with a baby who awakens and cries every hour or so and who is so difficult to soothe.

Gradually, however, parents can learn what works and will feel less helpless. Very sensitive, easily roused babies are often as challenging as active babies. The suggestions we have outlined above are also useful for these babies. A baby needs up to 16 hours of sleep a day, but only half of it may occur at night when parents can catch up on their sleep. There are many strategies for parents to use to help their baby work toward night sleeping and day waking.