



Don't let baby tears tear you apart

Top tips and relationship advice
for new parents

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Introduction

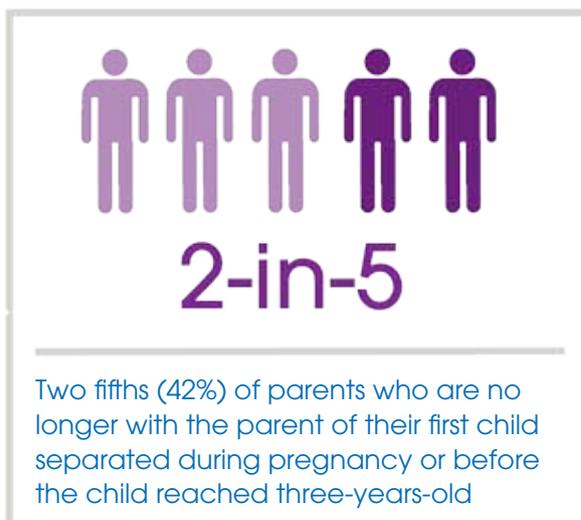
Becoming a parent is a time of great joy for many people. But it's not an easy transition and nothing can fully prepare new parents for all the changes that can come with it.

This paper focuses on one thing that all babies do whether they're the son of a duke or born to a teenage mum: Cry.

While crying is a very natural thing for babies to do to communicate, many parents will know that hearing the sound of an inconsolable baby can become incredibly stressful and can strain the couple's relationship.

OnePlusOne's recent report – Sleep, Sex and Sacrifice: the transition to parenthood a testing time for relationships – highlighted some of the common challenges that can shake a parent's relationship with their partner.

The report included a survey of 1,403 parents, which revealed that 'lack of sleep' is the biggest single cause of relationship strain for couples who have just had a baby¹. The research also revealed that two-fifths (42%) of parents who are no longer with the parent of their first child separated during pregnancy or before the child reached three-years-old².



In the first section of our guide we take a scientific look at why we are hard-wired to respond to the sound of a crying baby in the way that we do (did you know our ears are tuned to be most sensitive to 3,000 hertz - the exact frequency of a baby's wail!?) The next section provides advice from relationship experts and 'top tips' from parents on how to avoid constant crying causing a relationship to unravel.

There is considerable evidence that a harmonious parental relationship makes for better parenting and a more contented child. As such, OnePlusOne is committed to helping couples work through any teething troubles that arise from the transition to parenthood. We hope this paper will raise awareness and add to the discussion about how parents can help to strengthen their relationship.

We would love to receive comments and your own top tips on this subject – you can join in the conversation at www.thecoupleconnection.net, www.dad.info, www.netmums.com and www.cafamily.org.uk or write to us at info@oneplusone.org.uk

1: ICM surveyed 1,403 parents, including 512 new parents who have one child under the age of three. The research was carried out between April 19th and 24th 2013. The survey showed that more than one fifth (23%) of new parents felt a lack of sleep since having a baby had the biggest negative effect on their relationship – this is higher than any other single factor.

2: Nearly a quarter (23%) of parents are no longer with the partner they had their first child with and of those parents who had split up, two-fifths (42%) parted company either during pregnancy or before the child reached three-years-old. The full findings are published in Sleep, Sex and Sacrifice: the transition to parenthood a testing time for relationships

What is it about babies crying that really gets to us?

We're hard-wired to react

The sound of a crying baby has a unique effect on our hearing system³ - it is perceived as an alarm and causes distress. Even if we're not the baby's parent, as human beings we are hard-wired to respond strongly to the sound of crying babies. Hearing a baby cry provokes an intense and almost immediate reaction in the areas of the brain that deal with emotion before the brain has had a chance to process it consciously⁴.

Hearing a baby cry also increases blood-pressure and skin-conductance. This indicates our instinctive "flight or fight" response is kick-started in to action by the sound of a baby crying⁵.

These findings suggest it's likely that we evolved to respond to the sound of crying in such a way so that we feel really compelled to do something about it. This is why our ears are most sensitive to sounds around 3,000 hertz - the pitch a baby wails at!

Sound, stress and strain

Any noise that is not under our control can be a major cause of stress. A constant sound, such as a baby crying, changes from being a one off stressor into a 'strain', which is linked to high stress levels, anxiety and poorer health⁶.

Anyone experiencing stress diverts all their attention and physical energy towards reducing or removing the stressful noise source. As a consequence they have less psychological resources than usual to function normally. This often leads to communication problems, increased levels of frustration and irritation with people or things that are perceived to be a distraction from reducing the noise. This is a common pattern with couples who have babies that cry a lot⁷.

Sleep suffers

Not only do parents of crying babies have to endure the stress related to constant noise, they also suffer a double whammy if the crying interrupts their sleep as sleep deprivation can further increase levels of stress hormones⁸.

Lack of sleep also leads to negative mood, low productivity, memory problems, increased blood pressure, slowed reaction times, and problems with clearly conveying thoughts. Sadly these often result in communication problems and lack of patience with others - which clearly isn't helpful for couples who are already stressed and tired.

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- 7:** DeLongis, A., Folkman, S. & Lazarus, R. S. (1988). The impact of daily stress on health and mood: Psychological and social resources as mediators. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 54(3), Mar 1988, 486-495
- 8:** Meerlo, P., Sgoifo, A. & Suchecki, D. (2008). Restricted and disrupted sleep: Effects on autonomic function, neuroendocrine stress systems and stress responsivity. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, Volume 12, Issue 3, June 2008, Pages 197-210

So what can be done?

So, your new baby has arrived, you are home and safe and ready to move forward with your new life. However, your baby just won't stop crying, no matter what you do.

First and foremost do always check for the usual things that might be upsetting the baby such as a nappy needing changing, hunger or thirst, being too hot or cold, tired or in need of a cuddle. Crying is a way a baby can communicate with the people around, so ensure that nothing is wrong that you need to deal with. There are many practical tips available on soothing a crying baby at: [nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/soothing-crying-baby](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/soothing-crying-baby)

But sometimes the crying just won't stop and you are finding yourself getting stressed and upset with your partner. Where do you go from here?

Jan Mitcheson, relationship expert at OnePlusOne and a former health visitor, gives some tips to help parents to hold it together while coping with a crying baby:

- Remember you will slowly begin to learn what your baby needs. It's a learning curve so stay patient with yourself and each other as you find your feet
- Remember that crying is normal, it is nothing you are or aren't 'doing' but if you are really worried do talk to your health visitor or GP
- Try to stay calm with each other - babies are sensitive to how you are feeling

- Go for a walk together with your baby or a drive in the car, sometimes moving them in to a different environment can help soothe the baby
- Take it in turns to soothe the baby, giving each other an opportunity to have a rest
- Give yourself a break, take some time out together when you can- let someone else who you trust take over for little while
- Of course, when we are upset and stressed we take it out on the person closest to us, usually our partner. Remember, you are learning the ropes together and there will be times when one of you 'has a moment' - try and stay strong and supportive for each other during these times
- If you find that you're arguing a lot, check out OnePlusOne's 'How to argue better' course for advice on resolving conflict (<http://thecoupleconnection.net/courses/courses/how-to-arguebetter>)
- Sleep deprivation tends to make people a bit snappy, so don't take sharp comments to heart - remember that you're both as exhausted as each other
- 'Rainy day your relationship' - when things are good, say that they are, tell your partner you love them, show appreciation. This often works as a cushion for the bad times

Top tips for holding it together:

Louise

"Continuous crying meant we both ended up sleep deprived which was incredibly hard to cope with. We were both up in the night and we didn't know what to do for the best. We both got over tired and angry and used to say (and shout) horrible things to each other in the middle of the night. We had an agreement to disregard anything we said to each other between the hours of 11pm and 7am because we were just pushing each other to breaking point."

Nancy

"It's ok for you to make mistakes, learn from them and move on. Dad might not do things the same way that you do, but it doesn't necessarily mean he's doing something the wrong way. Let him figure out things for himself - it's his baby too."

Dan

"My two-month old's grumpy time is in the evening just after her big brother has gone to bed. She often calms down if we take her out so I sometimes take her for a walk with our dogs. The crying never sounds as deafening when mixed in with outdoor noise either, and the motion/change of scenery often calms her down anyhow. I find it relaxing and it gives my partner some peace too."

Cathy

"We found music was a good way of getting our son to calm down. We used to stick on Mumford & Sons really loud and he would chill. If you find an album that works for them and that you both like as well you can enjoy listening to it together once the baby has calmed down."

Mirain

"If this is happening regularly, see if a friend or relative will babysit so you and your partner can have some date nights. It helps take you out of the 'baby bubble', regain perspective and enjoy being new parents while also remembering you are still a couple."

Stephen

"Remember that when the baby is crying it's perfectly normal and neither you nor your partner are to blame. As well as talking to each other about it, talk to friends and relatives with babies - it will help you let off steam so you're less likely to take it out on each other."

Julie

"Keep talking to one another! Never assume your other half will know what you need or what the baby needs - they need guidance and straight talking."

Judy

"Take at least ten slow deep breaths, turn off the TV/radio, don't shout at your partner and speak calmly. Take it in turns to settle and soothe the baby and if you are losing your temper let the calmest adult soothe baby for an hour while the other adult goes away to calm down. If baby is still upset they can come back and take over."

Ella

"When our daughter was going through a phase of crying a lot at night, we alternated which side of the bed the baby monitor was on so that we shared the responsibility of getting up to check on her."

About OnePlusOne

As the UK's leading relationship research organisation, OnePlusOne is committed to strengthening relationships. Through its web service TheCoupleConnection, OnePlusOne places its wealth of research directly into the hands of couples and parents, empowering them to work on their relationships themselves.

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Contact a Family

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