

## CRYING AS A FIRST LANGUAGE

By June Solnit Sale, MSW



Children's crying can be the cause of great irritation, consternation and puzzlement. What should adults do to respond to a crying child? I think we often respond in the way we were responded to as babies and toddlers. We have often heard, I'm sure, "let him cry it out", or "the kid is spoiled" or "close the door and let's see what will happen. Maybe she will get the message and just stop crying".

Babies and toddlers smile, gurgle or seem content, to let us know that all is right with the world. They cry before they are able to talk and try (sometimes not successfully) to tell us what is wrong and what is bothering them. It is the way that babies and toddlers communicate. We know from attachment research that if young children are not appropriately responded to, they learn not to trust, or can learn that their needs will not be met, so why bother? Some toddlers even show signs of deep-seated anger with the world around them and it may manifest itself in negative and testing behavior. That is one way to get attention. Even negative attention

Renee Spitz, in his research in hospitals in the 1940's, found that babies who were not touched and picked up from their cribs when they cried, would just "turn off" the world around them and might even die.. This most often happened in institutions like hospitals or orphanages. In those days babies were kept in "sterile" environments. Their cribs were covered with nets and attendants were not encouraged to touch or interact with their young charges. Babies and toddlers learned that when the attendants didn't pay any attention to them and help was not available, they would give up. If crying didn't bring interaction, why bother? We hear that still happens in orphanages in other countries. Let us hope that this doesn't happen in our country today.

In the 1960's, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth taught us that positive and negative attachments are established early and can last for a life-time. A baby or toddler that is secure that his needs are being met, or she is being attended to when she communicates the need for attention, can use this experience for the rest of life.

At what point do we need to respond to crying babies and toddlers? This is a question most parents and caregivers might want to ask themselves. What should the response be? I hear you crying and I'm right here" or "Hey, you're crying again and I don't know what's bothering you". Some parents and caregivers might feel so tired or sleep-deprived their response could be: "I'm so tired and need some sleep, please get your act together" or try to change the subject by playing peek-a-boo or some sort of game to which the child has had a positive response in the past.

What should our physical response be to crying babies and toddler? Do we pick them up and hold and cuddle them? Do we wait a certain amount of time before soothing them? Do we leave them where they are and talk or play with them? There is no right answer to these questions, but every parent and caregiver knows that there are limits for children and adults, as well as unique responses to their child.

I am not writing this article to make parents or caregivers feel guilty or incompetent, because I know there is enough guilt to cover the world of parenting and caregiving. I am writing this as a kind of teaser for you to think back to your memories of how you were treated as a child when you could not communicate your needs. Some of you will brim with pride in thinking about how you were treated and others will think that you will not repeat what was done to you.

I am writing this little love letter to parents and caregivers of babies and toddlers from the vantage point of being an old woman who can remember the response of my parents when I was eighteen months old. I was hospitalized with a life-threatening illness and was in the Los Angeles Children's Hospital for two weeks. Those were not the times when parents could stay with their children and so my parents had to make a daily trip on a street car to visit. I was told that I wouldn't eat or respond to the nurses and only when my mother arrived would I show any signs of normalcy. Then, I would try to stand in my crib and reach out to her, crying and begging for the kind of attention I was used to. Although that was almost a century ago, I still have the feeling of being almost dead until I saw a familiar and loving face to give me the courage to cry out.

My experience as a very young child evidently made a tremendous impression on me and the way my husband and I raised our own children. And it is with a great deal of pride that I see our children responding to their children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren with great empathy, kindness and love. We all have some choices about the world in which we live and helping babies and toddler maneuver and manage the future will have a great impact on all of us in years to come.