



# Educaring

## Resources for Infant Educarers

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### When Babies Cry

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I used to think that my goal in life was to make my children happy. Maybe I got that from my mother who became very uncomfortable in the face of any feelings that weren't sunny or at least neutral. When there was upset, anger or even unhappy commotion my mother would say in a scared voice, "Let's just be happy!" It took me a lot of years to rethink the goal of always trying to keep my children happy. Magda helped me see babies' expressions of emotion differently, even though my children were no longer babies when I met her.

As a new mother I remember getting up in the middle of the night in response to the screams coming from my son in the crib next door. I would already be nervous when I arrived in his room and then if I couldn't calm him down, I would get frustrated. It wouldn't take me long to get to the point of being desperate! Of course, many times, he was screaming because he needed something, so I didn't have to go through all that emotion. If he was hungry, I fed him. But sometimes there was no need that I could discern and nothing I could do made him happy. "Don't cry," I used to plead with him. What I didn't think of doing was calming *myself*. Of course, my baby was affected by my emotional state. He could feel my muscle tension, pounding heart and fast breathing.

I can still see Magda approaching a screaming baby with her calm voice and gentle manner. It didn't always work right away to calm the baby, but that's okay. What Magda did was allow the baby his feelings and provide a peaceful presence while the baby expressed them. It wasn't easy for me to learn to do that. I tend to get caught up in other people's feelings, even today. But after I learned to calm myself

around babies, I became more effective in working with them.

Magda helped me see that I can't be responsible for another person's happiness—even a baby. I can't *make* another person happy. I can be there and wait, knowing my presence can be calming. I can acknowledge the feelings, but not try to change those feelings. I can support unhappy babies and let them find ways to calm themselves. Magda used to say, "Every emotion has a beginning, a middle, and an end." Even though sometimes a baby's cry may seem never ending, it always ends.

Why do babies cry? Certainly hunger, a gas pain or something else physically uncomfortable can cause crying. Obviously if there is something to be done to relieve the baby, then that's the best thing to do. Babies also cry when something startles or scares them and they need comforting. Tired babies can cry too—or those who are overstimulated. In that case you can put them down to rest or find ways to reduce the stimulation, which may be bright lights,

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loud noises, or an uncomfortable texture on the baby's skin. If something is wrong, you can take the crying as communication and respond to it in ways that meet the baby's specific need. But sometimes there is nothing wrong and then it's good to remember that you can meet a baby's needs, and that may make her happy. But she is happy because she no longer has a need, not because you actually controlled her emotions. When nothing makes the baby happy, that's the time to remember not to take responsibility for the baby's feelings. Work with your own feelings and separate them from the baby's. Keeping calm yourself may be the main thing you can do for the baby. If

you can't calm yourself in the presence of the crying, take a time out and see if you can do better in another room. Tell the baby you are going to leave for a minute. Make sure the baby is safe to be left alone, of course, and come back as soon as you can.

Nobody is happy all the time. You might say calmly to the baby, "You are crying and crying, I am right here for you, I am listening to you." Babies express their feelings through crying, body movements, and facial expressions. So do children and grown-ups, but we also use words. Babies too will learn to use words to express their feelings, if they have models who do so and if they are allowed to truly experience their feelings.