

# What to Do for a Fussy Baby

## A Problem-solving Approach



Janet Gonzalez-Mena

A FIVE-MONTH-OLD BABY arrives in your busy, lively center or family child care home. She's strapped in her car seat. She is squirming, frowning, and crying a little. You perceive that she has a problem. When it becomes clear that she can't solve it herself, *you* are then the one with the problem. You have to figure out what she needs. How can you find out? And what can you do for this baby?

### What does this baby need?

If you know the baby well, you may be able to quickly determine what she needs, and then either meet the need yourself or set up an environment that will allow her to meet it. If she doesn't give you any clues, you can ask the person who brought her what she might need. The better the caregiver knows the infant and her family, the easier it is to read her signals and decide how to respond.

Hunger is a major need for babies this age, and so is sleep. A soiled diaper can also cause fussing. She can't solve the hunger problem herself or change her own diaper, but she can probably put herself to sleep—or learn to do this—given the right conditions.

This article isn't about the obvious needs, such as hunger, sleep, or a diaper change, or even about subtle needs. It is about one need that isn't subtle, but also isn't obvious to many families and caregivers. This need presents a problem the baby can't solve by herself. You may be surprised to learn what it is.

### Typical caregiver responses to fussiness

Let's say the caregiver knows that the baby in the car seat has been recently changed and fed after waking up happily from a good night's sleep. The caregiver isn't getting clear signals from the baby, so what are some possible ways to respond to the fussing? Here are a number of responses I have observed in similar situations with a baby of about the same age.

I've seen teachers pick up a fussy infant, hold her, jiggle her, talk to her, and try to soothe her. I've seen them leave her in the car seat and put an interesting toy in her hand, or prop her in a sitting position and put a toy that dangles objects within her reach. The caregiver's motive is usually entertainment and distraction, but stimulating cognitive development can be a motive as well. Some caregivers will take the baby out of the car seat and put her in a bouncer so the movement will entertain, soothe, or distract her. Perhaps a teacher will put a fussy baby in a cloth carrier so she is attached to an adult body as the teacher goes about her work.

Any of these responses may stop the fussing, but none of them addresses a major need that hasn't been mentioned. Do you know what it is?

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**Janet Gonzalez-Mena, MA**, is an early childhood consultant with a special interest in infants, toddlers, and diversity. She is an RIE (Resources for Infant Educators) Associate, studied with Magda Gerber, and has trained at the Pikler Institute in Budapest with Anna Tardos, Emmi Pikler's daughter. E-mail: [jgmena@earthlink.net](mailto:jgmena@earthlink.net).

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## What's missing from the typical responses?

None of these typical responses takes into consideration an infant's need to move freely. When an infant hasn't yet started to crawl, it may seem as if movement is not important, but it is! Movement is important from the beginning of life.



Movement is not just about exercise and motor development, it's about learning as well as social-emotional and cognitive development. Carla Hannaford, a scientist, an educator, and the author of *Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head* (2005), writes, "The body plays an integral part in all our intellectual processes" (p. 15). So you could say that movement and learning to solve problems are related. Hannaford, who based her book on brain research, also states, "Movement, a natural process of life, is now understood to be essential to learning, creative thought, high level formal reasoning, and our ability to understand and act altruistically towards all those that share our world" (p. 235).

Back in the 1930s, before Hannaford was born and when brain research was still in its infancy, a pediatrician in Budapest, Dr. Emmi Pikler, began to study movement in infants. She observed that when they aren't restrained, even very young infants change position on the average of once a minute. From her studies and work as a family pediatrician, Pikler theorized that allowing babies to move freely has a positive influence on development and learning (Pikler & Tardos 1968; Pikler 1971, 1973, 1979, 1997; David & Appell 2001).

Besides using her theory in her work with families, Pikler thoroughly studied how it works in the residential nursery she opened at the request of the Hungarian government after World War II. Since it opened in 1946, the Pikler Institute

## Learning More about Infants' Bodily and Sensory Interest and Awareness

It may be hard to believe that babies don't get bored and don't need entertainment, especially if you are used to a busy lifestyle. Some of us get so busy that we lose touch with our own bodies and how they are connected to everything we think and do. If that is the case, you can become more observant of infants by getting back in touch with yourself.

Here are two ways to learn about how interesting one's own body can be.

1. Check out the Sensory Awareness Foundation ([www.sensoryawareness.org](http://www.sensoryawareness.org))—a group created by Charlotte Selver, a friend of Emmi Pikler's—and discover how you can learn about what a baby experiences while "just lying there." Sensory awareness is a practice in which adults rediscover their natural balance, self-confidence, and oneness with self and others. This awareness is thought to provide a strong foundation for adult problem-solving skills. Sensory awareness activities help adults do what babies do naturally: get in touch with their bodies and senses. They learn to live in the moment.
2. Develop your observation skills and really tune in to what a rich experience a baby has when awake, alert, moving, and sensing, even at five months old. Gerber (1998) said that observation is the tool through which you grow to understand the baby. If you get good at observing, you'll see what the Pikler Institute teaches—that long before babies begin to get around, they are involved in self-education. Have you noticed how fascinated a baby is when she first discovers her own hands? Well, that same fascination occurs as the baby discovers each muscle system in his body and how it works—it's just harder to see than what is called "hand regard."

Infants spend most of their waking hours from the beginning of life learning what their bodies can do and how to respond to gravity (A. Tardos, pers. comm.). Such learning is of infinite interest to babies. It also boosts their self-esteem by letting them know that they are competent beings.

(as the nursery and research/training center came to be called) has cared for thousands of children under three whose families couldn't care for them. Anna Tardos (Pikler's daughter) and her colleagues still conduct research at the institute. For 60 years researchers at the institute have been studying what happens to infants who spend their first three years in a carefully planned environment



with caregivers who are fully trained in Pikler's approach. A key part of the approach is freedom of movement, which facilitates development and learning. Pikler's approach also includes an overall plan to help each child feel individually respected and secure in a close relationship with one special caregiver and several others (David & Appell 2001).

Pikler taught that freedom of movement means that babies are never put into positions they can't get into by themselves. They are on their backs until they can turn over, and they are not propped in a sitting position nor restrained in any kind of device. (An exception, of course, is a car seat when being transported.) Pikler was clear that the adult's role in infants' motor development is to not interfere with it. What Pikler and her colleagues discovered from their research was that freedom of movement promotes the focus and motive

needed for self-education and gives the infant a lasting view of herself as a competent learner (Sensory Awareness Foundation 1994; David & Appell 2001). Young babies spend a good part of their waking hours exploring just what their bodies can do, trying out new movements and positions without any help from adults (A. Tardos, pers. comm.).

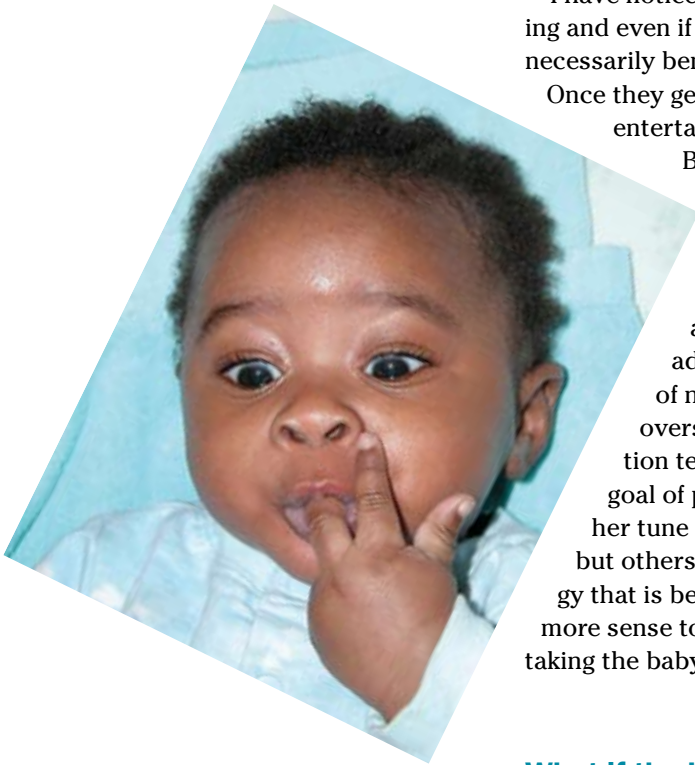
### How does freedom to move relate to caregivers' responses to fussing?

So considering that freedom of movement is a basic need and a path to learning, what might the caregiver in the opening do in response to the fussing—or even if the baby isn't fussing? The answer is to start by taking her out of the car seat. Infants' learning and development is hampered when they are in car seats or restrictive devices such as baby carriers, swings, or jumpers (Sobell 1994; Gerber 1998; David & Appell 2001; Hannaford 2005). Some babies get used to being in relatively helpless positions and don't complain, but that doesn't mean it's good for them.

If the infant in the opening scene is to move freely, she needs to be on her back on a firm surface in a protected space where she has room to wiggle and squirm. If she can turn over and roll around, she requires more space to safely move. The space should have several simple play objects that are close enough for the baby to reach. According to Magda Gerber, a friend and colleague of Emmi Pikler's, "The best choices are a variety of sturdy, simple objects that allow the infant to explore their properties through her touching and mouthing . . . her intellect develops as she stores these experiences in her memory"

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(Gerber & Johnson 1998, 88). The objects should not dangle above the infant; they should be where the baby can pick up, grasp, hold, turn, manipulate, mouth, and drop them. If more than one baby is in the play space, the space needs to be larger and the number of play objects increased.

### Could the baby be fussing because she is bored?

If you reexamine the typical responses mentioned earlier, you can see that many of them seem to be linked to the adult's perception that the baby is bored. Gerber writes, "I don't believe that babies become 'bored' in an adequate environment. Rather, it is our own projection: We think they are bored. They may, however, develop a high tolerance or need for stimulation if constantly stimulated and entertained" (1998, 36).

I have noticed adults attempting to entertain babies, even if they aren't fussing and even if they don't seem bored. Entertainment may be fun, but it isn't necessarily beneficial. The more entertainment infants get, the more they want.

Once they get used to being entertained by somebody, they lose the ability to entertain themselves (Gerber 1998). (See "Learning More about Infants' Bodily and Sensory Interest and Awareness.") Unfortunately many babies spend their days bombarded with stimulation—in the form of entertainment or just commotion—that floods them with sensations.

Let's say the baby from the beginning of this article entered a busy room with lots going on—children yelling and laughing, adults talking over the noise to one another, music playing, on top of noises from the street in front and the play yard in back. When overstimulation occurs and babies fuss, adults tend to use pacification techniques. We saw examples of that in the typical responses. The goal of pacifying the baby in such a stimulating environment is to help her tune out what's around her. Some babies can do this for themselves, but others need help. The problem is that it takes energy to tune out—energy that is better used for growing, developing, and learning. Wouldn't it make more sense to change the environment by reducing stimulation, if possible, or taking the baby to another room, rather than trying to pacify her?

### What if the baby continues to cry no matter what the caregiver does?

What if the fussy baby in the car seat just keeps crying, and you're desperate to distract her and get her to stop? Now think about your own childhood. Did adults try to distract you from what you were feeling? Some of us learned early in our childhood at least a dozen techniques to stop feelings from being expressed, and in some cases, even felt. We learned to view our feelings as unacceptable because they bothered those around us. Is that what we want infants to learn?

If her needs are met and the baby is still crying, why not just acknowledge the baby's feelings and let her feel them? You could say, "I see you are unhappy. Your feelings are okay with me. I don't know how to help you right now, but I'm here with you." You can also name the cause of the feeling, if you think you know it. For example, you could also say, "I think you miss your mother; you'll

be here with me while she is gone. She'll be back later." This should be said in an understanding but confident tone. The purpose of saying those words isn't to make the crying go away, but merely to acknowledge the feelings.

If you've done what you can to meet the needs, the baby's crying is not a reflection on you, your caring, or your skills—it's about allowing emotions to be expressed instead of repressed. When babies understand that what they feel is okay with the people around them, they have a better chance of learning to calm themselves—or in technical terms, learn *self-regulation*, a problem-solving skill.

Self-regulation is one of the primary lessons of the early years and an important readiness skill for school when children get older (Gillespie & Seibel 2006). But it pays off long before school age. This same baby we've been focusing on will settle herself down when she gets a chance to learn to do it. She learns when you reassure her that she is okay, you're there, and she has the ability to calm herself. That doesn't mean you shut her off in another room and leave her to "cry it out." Keep periodic contact and continue to reassure her. Your confidence in her ability to calm herself is conveyed to her, whether you realize it or not. Once she learns she can self-soothe, you will feel secure in the knowledge that she doesn't need distractions.

Self-regulation is strengthened by relationships. Think about it: What babies most need are caregivers who have a relationship with them and can meet their needs (Bardige 2006; Bardige et al., forthcoming). One of those basic, but often overlooked, needs involves freedom of movement (Pikler & Tardos 1968; Pikler 1971, 1973, 1979; Gerber 1998; Gerber & Johnson 1998; Hannaford 2005).



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## Conclusion

Babies, from the beginning, develop an awareness of their bodies that most adults have lost touch with. With perpetual outside entertainment in infancy and without freedom to move their bodies, babies lose the natural awareness and some of the abilities with which they are born. Their problem-solving skills can decrease rather than increase as they grow. Most people reading this know at least one fussy baby who needs constant entertainment and stimulation. Think about how that baby got that way.

Although this article has stressed meeting needs and freedom of movement in response to fussing, it's important to acknowledge there is no way to guarantee a fuss-free or problem-free infant. Problems, and the feelings connected to them, are part of life. Just as movement helps infants develop and learn, so do problems—even hard ones—and feelings—even fussy ones.

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## Additional Resources

Some of the ideas and suggestions in this article may be surprising to you. Since this article doesn't go deeply into any of the subjects it introduces, you may want to investigate further on your own. Here are some resources for you to use.

### Print and video

- Falk, J. 2002. *Mirar al niño. La escala de desarrollo Instituto Pikler (Lóczy)*. Buenos Aires: Ariana & Asociacion Internacional Pikler (Lóczy).
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### Web sites

- The International Pikler (Lóczy) Association. [www.aipl.org](http://www.aipl.org)
- The Pikler Institute. [www.pikler.org](http://www.pikler.org)
- The Program for Infant/Toddler Care. [www.pitc.org](http://www.pitc.org)
- Resources for Infant Educators. [www.rie.org](http://www.rie.org)
- Sensory Awareness Foundation. [www.sensoryawareness.org](http://www.sensoryawareness.org)
- ZERO TO THREE. [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)