

CALMING YOUR BABY... AND GETTING SLEEP: THE 4TH TRIMESTER, THE CALMING REFLEX & THE 5 "S'S"

by Dr. Harvey Karp, M.D.

"JUST PUT COTTON IN YOUR EARS AND GIN IN YOUR STOMACH!"

— 19th Century colic advice

Having a baby is indeed a miracle of life! As everyone will tell you *your life will never be the same...* and while the changes require hard work the reward is truly a treasure. The growing love and pleasure that our babies give to us is hard to fully appreciate before they are born. It may start at the moment of birth or a short while after, but it is one of the sweet experiences that truly make life worth living.

Once your baby is born, you will need to know a few things to help keep her healthy and happy. Of course you need to know how to feed her (breast milk is best...don't be shy to ask for help) as well as how to calm her crying and how to help her sleep.

If you haven't been around babies very much, your job will definitely take practice. In fact, many new parents say that parenting initially feels a little like riding a bike for the first time...exciting, scary and pretty wobbly. But, believe it or not, with the right approach you'll soon master these simple skills.

One of the first surprises that you, as a new parent, face is realizing that your little one is not fully ready for the world at birth. In a sense she needs a "4th trimester" of holding and rocking.

Here's what I mean: Unlike a baby horse (which is able to run the very first day of life) our newborns are smushy and immature. In a way, we "evict" our babies from the womb after 9 months even though they aren't fully ready—if we waited any longer their large human brains and heads would get big enough to make birth dangerous for them and for mom. Once your baby passes 3 months her eyes will follow you as you cross the room, she'll smile and coo in response to your smiling face. But, for the first few months she'll need quite a bit of help.

That's why we rock and hold our babies so many hours a day after birth (even 18 hours is an immediate 25% cutback from the constant holding your baby got in the womb). But, if we are supposed to imitate the womb for the first 3 months it is really important to know what your baby's life was like inside there...and it was busy! In fact, in the womb babies are constantly jiggled, softly touched by the soft, warm walls and they hear the whooshing sound of the blood flowing through the placenta...a sound about twice as loud as a vacuum cleaner!

Now you can begin to understand why so many babies have trouble after they are born. It is not that our world is overstimulating to them (although, of course, they will cry if you clang pots by their heads), but rather that our world is profoundly understimulating to them. For them, being alone in a quiet room on a flat bed is like an adult being locked in a dark closet. No wonder babies usually fall asleep when we take them to noisy basketball games or parties! And, no wonder they can cry so much! The total quiet and stillness drives some babies crazy and ruins their sleep. That's where the "calming reflex" comes in!

It turns out that babies have many reflexes from the very first seconds of life. For example, grasping, blinking, sucking, etc. are all automatic responses—reflexes—that are essentially "built in software." What I discovered a few years ago is that all babies have another incredible reflex that no one ever knew about... the calming reflex.



Philippa with Tommy

CALMING YOUR BABY... (CONT'D)



Sylvan, 2 days

The calming reflex is a virtual off switch to crying that can soothe 95% of fussy babies in minutes (or less)—even colicky ones—and can help any baby sleep an extra few hours each night! Like the knee reflex, the calming reflex requires some precision to turn it on, in this case five specific steps...the 5 “S’s”:

1. **SWADDLING:** Wrapping makes your baby feel magically returned to the womb and it will keep her from flailing her arms. If not done correctly, the baby may cry even harder. Remember to swaddle snugly. Loose blankets may be a choking risk. Also, don't force your baby's legs to be straight (let the hips flex a bit) and avoid overheating (babies should never be sweaty and flushed).
2. **SIDE/STOMACH:** This position triggers the calming reflex by imitating your baby's position in the uterus. Keep in mind the side/stomach position is great for calming crying, but babies should only sleep on their backs.
3. **Shhhh:** “Shhhh”ing imitates the loud whooshy sound your baby heard in your uterus. Your shush must initially be loud enough to match the sound of your baby's crying or she won't hear it. Using a soothing sounds white noise CD will calm crying and boost sleep.

4. **SWINGING:** Rhythmic moving imitates the jiggling your baby felt inside the uterus. Ways to use motion are: baby slings and carriers, dancing, infant swings, rocking, car rides or bouncy seats.

5. **SUCKING:** Putting a breast, pacifier or finger into a baby's mouth satisfies a baby's sucking need and turns on the calming reflex.

As amazing as it sounds, babies rarely cry from gas, overeating, acid reflux and the like. Gas seems a logical cause of a baby's crying. After all, fussy infants often double up, make a pained sounding cry, have rumbling stomachs and pass gas. It's no wonder generations of physicians have given newborns opium, antispasmodics and burp drops to settle them.

But why would the old home remedies of going for a car ride or running a hair drier work to calm a baby if the crying were caused by real pain? A car ride won't help us when we have a stomachache. As you can probably see by now, these things work because they imitate the rich and strong sensations that babies experience in the womb...24/7. And these are exactly the sensations that turn on the calming reflex.

Most parents around the world intuitively mimic the rocking, holding and shushing of the uterus, but in our culture, we are mistakenly taught to whisper and tiptoe around our babies, believing that they need a quiet and still environment. Nothing could be further from the truth!

By doing the 5 “S’s”—exactly right—we can imitate the womb and activate the calming reflex. You can learn more about this from my book and DVD *The Happiest Baby on the Block*. Parents who get really good at doing the 5 S's can usually soothe their babies in minutes and add 1-3 hours to their nighttime sleep.

Dr. Harvey Karp is a pediatrician and child development specialist and assistant professor of pediatrics at UCLA. He is the author of the bestselling books/DVDs *The Happiest Baby on the Block* and *The Happiest Toddler on the Block*. Dr. Karp and his wife and adult daughter reside in Los Angeles. www.thehappiestbaby.com.