



Australian Association for
Infant Mental Health Inc.

Responding to baby's cues

Position paper 2

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The Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc. (AAIMHI) aims to improve professional and public recognition that infancy is a critical period in psycho-social development, and to work for the improvement of the mental health and development of all infants and families.

Background to AAIMHI's position

AAIMHI acknowledges the now vast body of research concerning the importance of the development of a secure attachment relationship between children and their caregivers. This research has clearly established the ongoing benefits to children, families and society that flow from early experiences of emotional security. A relationship in which a baby feels secure and connected to his caregiver promotes later psychological wellbeing. Children who are securely attached to their parents are more likely to:

- Be able to cope well with stress
- Have satisfying relationships
- Have healthy self-esteem
- Have good mental health
- Reach their full intellectual potential
- Have fewer behavioural problems
- Have fewer discipline problems
- Have fewer problems separating from parents when it is developmentally appropriate.

Research has shown that infants are innately attuned to and affected by the presence and facial expressions of their caregivers. From birth onwards, babies use facial expressions, vocalisations and body language to communicate their feelings (for example joy, delight, discomfort and distress) and to communicate their physical and emotional needs. Babies feel emotionally secure when their caregivers read these cues, and respond in a timely and empathic manner.

When caregivers are tuned in to infants' cues they can respond sensitively. For instance, the caregiver can read when the infant is ready to play, or when he or she is distressed and needs comfort. This sensitive responsiveness is crucial to the infant's development of trust in their caregiver and in the world around them. Infants are well aware when their attempts to communicate – including their cries – are ignored by a caregiver, and can become confused, frustrated and distressed if this occurs. If this happens consistently, infants may cease to express their needs in an open and healthy manner as their trust in their caregiver falters. Alternately, research indicates that responding sensitively to infants' cues can have positive long term and even transgenerational consequences.

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WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR
INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

Statement of AAIMHI's position on responding to baby's cues

In view of the above statements, AAIMHI believes that professionals advising parents should recognise that an infant's attachment to his or her caregiver is of central importance, and should strive to support the development of a healthy attachment between baby and caregiver. Further, they should ensure that their advice does no harm to this developing sense of security. While many parents are over-burdened and need support and relief, recent scientific research in the area of infant neurological development indicates that it is now wrong to advise parents that routinely refusing attention to a crying baby will bring no harm.

Secure attachment is more likely to occur when parents are supported to reflect on and value the child's inner world – their needs, thoughts feelings and intentions – as reflective parents are more likely to respond promptly and sensitively to their children's cues. One way professionals can support parents' reflection is by modelling attachment behaviours – such as being predictable, kind and curious – in their relationship with the parents. By providing a secure attachment experience for the parents with whom they work, professionals can bring an attachment focus to every meeting. As they attempt to understand the parents' emotional needs, they encourage parents to understand and respond their baby's need to feel safe, secure and connected to a loving adult.

Parents can be reassured that babies are resilient enough to cope with incidental or accidental lapses in responsiveness (for example, when a parent is caught in traffic while the baby is crying). This resilience increases with age, and normal delays such as these can be healed if followed up by soothing and comforting. Babies bounce back when their feelings are heard and validated.

All babies cry and have fussy periods. These behaviours merit special mention, as parents often seek professional support to help them understand what the crying means. Crying is best understood as proximity-seeking behaviour; that is, the expression of a need for physical and emotional closeness with the caregiver. Babies become distressed if left to cry alone, and this can precipitate negative long term psychological consequences if done repeatedly. The quality of the parent-infant relationship can be enhanced when professionals encourage parents to view their babies' crying as a sign that they are upset and in need of the parent.

AAIMHI maintains that babies' upset feelings are to be taken seriously, and that parents should be encouraged to do whatever they can to help soothe their babies (for example holding, stroking, rocking, singing, or talking to the baby). There is emerging evidence that the same brain systems that control physical pain also relate to psychological pain that comes with the feeling of disconnection from a loved one. Sensitive responsiveness allows for the baby's brain to release endorphins and opioids which bring relief and comfort to the child.

When parents help babies to manage their difficult feelings, their babies learn how to do this for themselves as they grow older, thus they develop a healthy capacity for self-regulation. This is true *even if the crying persists*. Many healthy infants have long periods of being unsettled, where the cause of the crying is not immediately evident to the parent. A parent's kind presence helps babies feel less alone with their feelings, making them less overwhelming and easier to tolerate. Caregivers can be reassured that babies are resilient enough to cope with incidental or accidental lapses in responsiveness (for example, when a parent is caught in traffic while the baby is crying). This resilience increases with age,

and normal delays such as these can be repaired if followed by comforting. Babies bounce back when their feelings are heard and validated.

In summary, parents and caregivers can improve the quality of the attachment relationship by:

- a) Paying close attention to babies (by watching their expressions, movements and reactions to caregivers' responses), and thinking about what the baby is trying to communicate
- b) Sensitive responding to babies' cues, and
- c) Responding promptly to their babies' cries.

Professionals can play a key role in improving the quality of the attachment relationship by both modelling and encouraging the above.

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Further resources

Video

Getting to know you – Recognizing Infant Communications and Social Interaction. Northern Beaches Child and Family Health Service & NSW Institute of Psychiatry – Hilton Cordell Productions.

Websites

www.zerotothree.org

www.circleofsecurity.org