

Is Crying it Out Dangerous for Kids?



By [Lylah M. Alphonse, Senior Editor, Yahoo! Shine](#) | [Parenting](#) – Fri, Dec 16, 2011 4:30 PM EST



Is crying it out hurting your child?

If the link between parent and child is strong enough that [kids can "catch" their parents' stress](#), it may stand to reason that babies crave the physical connection that comes with a cuddle. It's something that plenty of parents are more than happy to provide during the day but, [when it comes to bedtime](#), the modern emphasis has been on teaching good sleep habits -- and giving mom and dad a break.

Most sleep-deprived parents get to the point where they're willing to try almost anything in order to get a good night's rest. While some decry it as cruel, others have had success with the ["cry it out" method](#) -- teaching babies to "self-soothe" by letting their nighttime crying go unanswered.

But is "crying it out" about establishing independence? Or is it just a way of making those early years [easier for parents](#)?

In an article published this week in [Psychology Today](#), one researcher says that crying it out could be dangerous for children, leading to a lifetime of harm.

"A crying baby in our ancestral environment would have signaled predators to tasty morsels," writes Darcia Narvaez, an Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the Collaborative for Ethical Education at the University of Notre Dame. "So our evolved parenting practices alleviated baby distress and precluded crying except in emergencies."

When babies are stressed, their bodies release the hormone cortisol, which can damage or even destroy neurons in their still-developing brains, [researchers at Yale University and Harvard Medical School have found](#). That can lead to a higher incidence of ADHD, poor academic performance, and anti-social tendencies.

Human babies are hardwired for near-constant holding, breastfeeding, and having their other needs met quickly -- the hallmarks of [Attachment Parenting](#). Narvaez points out -- in order for their brains to develop properly. Even Dr. Richard Ferber, whose sleep-training method is commonly called the Cry It Out Method, says that he never intended parents to completely ignore their babies' nighttime tears.

"I've always believed that there are many solutions to sleep problems, and that every family and every child is unique," he said [in an interview with BabyTalk](#). "People want one easy solution, but there's no such thing. I never encouraged parents to let their babies cry it out, but one of the many treatment styles I described in my book is gradual extinction, where you delay your response time to your baby's wakings. I went to great pains in the second edition to clarify that that treatment is not appropriate for every sleep issue, of which there are many."

What he does encourage is teaching children to soothe themselves during normal nighttime wakings. But many parents extend his advice to include all bedtime-related crying. That's the type of crying it out sets kids up for stress-related problems, trust issues, anxiety disorders, reduced brain function, and a lack of independence, Narvaez writes. And since the problems are on a genetic level, they can't necessarily be fixed later in life.

"In studies of rats with high or low nurturing mothers, there is a critical period for turning on genes that control anxiety for the rest of life," Narvaez writes. "If in the first 10 days of life you have low nurturing rat mother (the equivalent of the first 6 months of life in a human), the gene never gets turned on and the rat is anxious towards new situations for the rest of its life, unless drugs are administered to alleviate the anxiety."

Could a lack of nurturing explain our ["Prozac Nation?"](#) Narvaez points out that she's witnessed the long-term physical effects of it firsthand.

"I was raised in a middle-class family with a depressed mother, harsh father and overall emotionally unsupportive environment -- not unlike others raised in the USA," she writes. "I have only recently realized from extensive reading about the effects of early parenting on body and brain development that I show the signs of undercare -- poor memory (cortisol released during distress harms hippocampus development), irritable bowel and other poor vagal tone issues, and high social anxiety."

The lack of nurturing, and the prevalence of parents who put their own needs in front of their kids', may be to blame for the mental and physical health problems that are plaguing the United States now.

"If we want a strong country and people," she writes, "we've got to pay attention to what children need for optimal development."