



## What's my baby telling me?

Riley is four months old and he has a lot to say, but he can't speak yet. Instead, Riley communicates through facial expressions, sounds, and body language. Over time, his parents are getting better at reading Riley's signals.

Dad: "Look at Riley. He's pulling his ear again. He seems a little fussy too."

Mom: "Do you think he's got a wet diaper? Jennifer down the street told me that when Emma pulls her ear, it almost always means she needs a diaper change."

Dad: "Wait, he's rubbing his eyes now. Maybe he's trying to tell us he's sleepy."

Mom: "You know, my mom told me that I pulled on my ear when I was sleepy. And it's getting close to naptime."

### Saying plenty without a word

Babies try to tell us what they want or need even before they can talk. Part of the fun of parenting is learning how your baby communicates. No two babies are alike and different babies use different expressions and movements to tell parents what they want.

Ken's little Alicia is fussy. She keeps crying even though Ken fed her an hour ago. He's tried picking her up but she keeps on crying, and now Alicia's pushing him away. What is she trying to tell him?

### Time for some detective work

Alicia is usually in a good mood, so Ken is pretty sure that something is upsetting her. Maybe she needs another burping? He tries burping her. No burp, more crying. Time to try something else! Could she still be hungry? Ken tries giving her a bottle. It doesn't work. Alicia's not hungry. She's still crying and now is rubbing her eyes and mouth. Maybe she's wet and needs a new diaper? Ken checks, but Alicia's diaper is dry. Maybe she's tired? Her last nap was a little short.

"Are you tired? Let's try some rocking and singing. *Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top, when the wind blows...*" Alicia yawns and settles a little. Soon she's sleeping on her daddy's shoulder.

Even though it took a few tries, Ken did many things right. Most importantly, he kept trying! Even if you think you know what your baby is trying to communicate, be prepared to try something else if your first idea does not work. Reading your baby's cues is like a dance—at first, you might step on each other's toes or move to the beat of different drummers. But there's always another chance, and with practice both of you will get better at working together.

### Never shake a baby

Sometimes babies keep crying no matter what you do. This can be hard for everyone, and it can be stressful. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or angry, it would be a good idea to put the baby down in the crib for a few moments so you can take a deep breath and calm yourself down. No matter how hard it can be, never shake or hit a baby to try to get him or her to stop crying. If possible, see if you can get some help from a family member or a friend.

Sometimes a simple change makes a difference for a crying baby. You can try going with the baby to a different room or going outside together, singing a song, taking the baby for a walk in the stroller or a drive in the car, or giving the baby a bath. Sometimes babies are upset by things like bright lights or noises that you might not notice at first, and a simple change can make a big difference.

## Getting in Tune with Baby

Babies use facial expressions and body language to communicate



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## Reading baby body language

The first step in reading your baby's cues is paying close attention. Watch your baby's expressions, her movements, and her reactions to your responses. Did it seem like what you tried worked? What about the second thing you tried? Go through the list of normal needs. Is it naptime, is she hungry or does she need a diaper change? Or consider the activities of the day. Does she need some quiet time after an active visit with her cousins, or is she seeing a new toy for the first time? Every baby finds ways to communicate. Here are some cues to consider.



### 1) "I'm interested—let's do more of this."

- Have eyes wide/bright
- Looks at you or an interesting object
- Smiles or show expressions of joy
- Reach for things (like your nose)



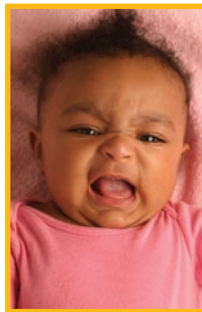
### 2) "I'm hungry!"

- Shows rooting behaviors—rubbing/sucking on your shirt
- Make mouth movements
- Put things in her mouth



### 3) "I'm sleepy."

- Rubs her eyes
- Rubs her face on your shirt
- Pulls on an ear
- Gets fussy



### 4) "I need a break!"

- Turns away
- Arches his back or twists
- Fusses or cries
- Closes his eyes
- Shows dull or glassy eyes
- Grabs his hands or body for comfort
- Kicks or waves arms rapidly

Research has found when parents don't respond to their baby's cues (or signals), babies get upset and show signs of stress. In one experiment, mothers were asked to play face-to-face with their 3- to 9-month-old babies as they normally would for a two-minute time segment. Mothers were then told to stop responding to their babies by becoming silent and showing no expression on their face for two minutes. For a final two minutes, mothers again played with their babies as they normally would (Gianino & Tronick, 1988; Weinberg & Tronick, 1994). What happened when moms stop responding to their babies for two minutes?

At first, some of the babies tried to get their moms to interact with them by smiling or making happy sounds. When that didn't work, the babies got upset. Some cried and most turned away, a few others tried to comfort themselves by sucking on their fingers. After a short time, the babies stopped trying to interact (Gianino & Tronick, 1988; Weinberg & Tronick, 1994).

These experiments helped show that parental responses are important. Clearly, infant facial expressions and behaviors are important ways your baby communicates with you. By paying attention to facial cues and body language, and adjusting your own behavior to your baby's needs, you are helping him feel secure and are supporting his healthy development.



## A caring response sends the right message

Responding to your baby's cues is a critical part of parenting. When parents and caregivers pay attention to infant expressions and actions and try to respond in caring ways, babies learn to handle stressful situations better. Responding to your baby's cues helps your baby learn to interact with others in a positive way.

When your baby gives you a cue and you respond to it, she begins to learn that cues work. The more you respond, the more you encourage her to send cues when she wants or needs something. At the same time, she learns which cues are effective in getting what she wants and needs, and you learn how to read her cues and respond effectively. Together, you create lots of cues that help you both know what to do.

## Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Pay close attention to how your baby communicates. Ask yourself: what is she trying to tell me? What does she need?
- ★ Take the daily schedule into account. How long has it been since he's been fed? Does he need a nap? Has his diaper been changed recently?
- ★ Once you have identified what your baby needs, be sure to respond promptly. If your response does not soothe her that is okay. Try something else.
- ★ Your baby loves to see you and your facial expressions, so play lots of face-to-face games with your baby. Peek-a-boo, got your nose, and paddy cake are favorites!
- ★ Try to follow your baby's lead. If she's showing you that she's interested, keep playing.
- ★ Try to be sensitive to cues that your baby needs a break. If she turns away while you are playing, wait for a moment to see if she turns back to you. If she begins fussing instead, it might be time to try something new or to let her relax for a moment while you stay near.
- ★ Don't expect to understand every signal, or to be in sync with your baby all the time. You won't always get it right. Communication is never perfect. If you're trying, you're doing a great job!

For more information on parenting and early learning,  
or to order copies of this Spotlight, visit [www.ParentingCounts.org](http://www.ParentingCounts.org).

### References:

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