

# SUMMARY

## THE HAPPIEST BABY ON THE BLOCK

HARVEY KARP



# **Summary of “The Happiest Baby on the Block” by Harvey Karp**

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The New Way to Calm Crying and Help Your  
Newborn Sleep Longer

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# Introduction

Trying to calm a crying baby has long been one of the biggest mysteries of life. Everyone has their own ideas of what the best soothing strategies are. For instance, in the 1970s, author Dr. Karp was taught that babies scream due to gas pains, so there were two approaches for soothing colic. First, try the classic holding, rocking, and pacifiers. If that failed, there were three medicines to try: sedatives, anti-spasms, and anti-gas drops. However, by the late 1970s, these medical approaches were called into question as sedatives were deemed inappropriate and anti-spasm medicines resulted in the death of several babies. And those anti-gas drops? They proved to be no more effective than water. It was in the 1980s that Dr. Karp's frustration in learning to soothe babies turned into shock and alarm as he treated severely injured babies whose parents had committed atrocious acts of abuse after being unable to calm their infants' persistent screaming. Why was it that our sophisticated society couldn't find a single solution for soothing a colicky baby? Even more, why was it that colicky screaming was *absent* in babies of several cultures around the world? As it turns out, our advanced society is quite backward when it comes to understanding the needs of babies. Once Dr. Karp realized our ideas about babies' crying has been built upon centuries of myth and misconception, the solution on how to soothe them suddenly became crystal clear. As you read, you'll become introduced to Dr. Karp's program of extremely effective techniques used to calm thousands of babies over the last twenty years. "Parents around the world have successfully used these methods to soothe their babies for thousands of years... and soon, you will, too!"

# The Fourth Trimester

Have you ever seen a baby horse or a baby cow? These newborn animals can walk, and even run, on their very first day of life. In fact, their survival depends on their ability to run. But what about our newborns? They can't run, walk, or even roll over! One British mother believed her daughter was so unready for the world that she nicknamed her "The Little Creature." This British mother isn't wrong, in many ways a new baby is more a fetus than an infant. Newborns spend most of their time sleeping and being fed. If your baby's birth was delayed just three more months, your baby would be born with the ability to smile, coo, and even flirt.

So why is it that our babies are born three months too soon? Well, there's a good reason. Getting a baby's head out after nine months of pregnancy is already a tight squeeze. At twelve months, it would be impossible! Human babies are so immature at birth because unlike a baby horse whose survival depends on strong bodies, a human baby's survival depends on big brains. Our babies' brains are so huge, we have to "evict" fetuses from the womb well before they're ready for the world so their head doesn't get stuck in the birth canal.

In the first three months, also known as the fourth trimester, newborns become easily overwhelmed and probably wish they could just hop back inside whenever life becomes too much. Unfortunately, we are not kangaroos so we must do what we can to surround them with the same comfort they felt in the womb. This is why we see everything from swaddling to swings to shushing, all of which are methods that return babies to a cuddly, rhythmic, womblike world until they are ready to coo, smile, and join the family. This early arrival also means that babies are equipped with one survival tool: crying.

From the moment your baby is born, your baby's powerful cry becomes a welcome sign that you've given birth to a healthy child. However, when that baby continues to scream and wail, that cry might become the last thing you

want to hear! Crying, however, is a baby's instinctual reaction and its way of ensuring that he is receiving constant care. It's his way of telling you that he's hungry, wet, soiled, or lonely, and he will only quiet down when you've given him what he needs. Your baby's cry is powerful enough to yank you out of bed in the middle of the night; however, it's a mistake to think that your baby is *trying* to call you for help. In fact, your baby has no idea at all that he's even sending a message.

In just a few months, your baby will learn that crying makes you come, but in the fourth trimester, responding to cries will not lead to bad habits. For the moment, you *want* him to learn that you will come whenever he cries. As a result, you send a message of predictable, consistent love and support which is *exactly* what will nurture his trust in you. On the other hand, letting your baby cry can be dangerous, and has been linked to increased breastfeeding problems and crib deaths. And while most infants typically cry for short periods, usually lasting a few minutes and totaling a half-hour a day, colicky babies can scream and yell for hours at a time, making for a parental nightmare!

Colicky babies seem to cry for no reason at all and can lead to frustrated, exhausted parents. Even worse, they can lead parents to do some awful things such as abuse the crying baby. Sometimes it may feel as if all hope is lost. But as you'll read in the following chapters, there are some soothing techniques you can use to help with this process.

# The Art of Soothing Your Baby Begins with Swaddling

As mentioned in the previous chapter, creating a womblike world in the first three months is essential for babies. When we swaddle, rock, and shush, many parents assume that this imitation soothes their baby because it makes her feel “back home.” But even more important than that, these experiences trigger a neurological response in your baby called the *calming reflex*. The calming reflex is the automatic reset button that stills a baby’s crying and can become a parent’s best friend.

A baby’s calming reflex kicks in inside the womb. Can you imagine if your fetus threw a temper tantrum inside you? All those pounding fists and kicking feet would not only be incredibly painful, but they could also damage the placenta or rip the umbilical cord, causing a fatal hemorrhage. Perhaps even more dangerous is the possibility that a squirming baby might get stuck sideways in the uterus and be unable to slide out, thus killing himself and his mother. In other words, the survival of our fetuses depends on this ancient calming reflex. And similar to how a doctor sets off a knee reflex with a precise whack of a little hammer, the calming reflex can be triggered through a specific set of actions. These actions are what Dr. Karp considers the 5 “S’s.”

The first S stands for *swaddle*, which is a simple way to trigger the calming reflex. Tight swaddling is the cornerstone of calming and is the essential first step in soothing your fussy baby. When you wrap your baby in a tight swaddle, your baby feels magically returned to the womb. Many irritable babies will resist wrapping, but it is a mistake to believe this resistance means that your baby needs his hands free. In fact, the opposite is true! Fussy young babies lack the coordination to control their flailing arms, so if their arms are left unwrapped then they make themselves even more upset. You should only use this technique during sleep and crying episodes and gradually reduce swaddling as your baby matures.



However, perhaps swaddling doesn't quite stop your fussy baby from crying. When this happens, you can use the second S: side/stomach, your baby's feel-good position. While most babies are content to be on their backs if they're in a good mood, a crying baby might feel as if being on his back is similar to falling, causing him to thrash and panic even more. The side or stomach positions can soothe your newborn baby by shutting off the Moro reflex - the reflex that goes off the moment they feel as if they are falling out of their mother's arms. Of course, the back is the safest sleeping position for all babies unless your doctor instructs otherwise. But no baby should ever be put to sleep on his stomach as there is a greater risk of SIDS or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

# Use Noise and Movement to Further Soothe Your Baby

In the last month of your baby's life inside the womb, space becomes tighter and tighter. Your baby is a natural yoga expert and feels nestled in and secure. However, that cozy room is neither quiet nor still. Instead, as your blood *whooshes* through your arteries, it creates a rhythmic din noisier than a vacuum cleaner. Amazingly, this is why many unborn babies become restless in the still of the night and stay calm in the day. In other words, noise can calm babies down, especially sounds that are similar to the whooshing of the womb.

The third S is shushing and can become a great method for calming your fussy baby. Many new parents mistakenly believe that babies prefer gentle sounds like the tinkling of a brook or the distant hush of the wind, but the reality is, the sound of roaring appliances is perhaps one of the most effective ways to settle screaming infants. And the louder the cry? The louder the noise must be to calm them. Take Marjan, for example, who put off feeding her hungry baby for a few minutes so she could finish getting ready to leave. Her daughter was just two-weeks-old and clearly didn't care for this plan, so she wailed impatiently for food. After a few minutes, however, her daughter quieted. Marjan panicked, was her baby okay? As she opened the bathroom door, she was relieved to find that her daughter was just fine. Instead, she realized that her daughter was calmed by the sound of the hairdryer.

The fourth S is swinging and is another method for breaking the crying cycle. You see, lying on a soft, motionless bed may be appealing to you, but to your newborn baby, it is disorienting and unnatural. Newborns can be compared to sailors who come to dry land after nine months at sea; the sudden stillness of the earth becomes uncomfortable and confusing. This is why swinging, or rhythmic, jiggly movement, is one of the most common methods you can use for calming your baby. Swinging must usually be

vigorous at first to get your baby to stop screaming, and then can be reduced to a gentler swing to keep him calm.

This is why many third-world parents use cradles or hammocks to keep their babies calm, many even “wear” their infants in slings to give the soothing feeling of motion with every step and breath. Even in the western world, tired parents turn to bouncy seats, car rides, and walks around the block to try and help their fussy babies find peace. You must also remember that swinging and rocking are not shaking. Swinging is a small movement you make with your baby while supporting her head and neck. Shaking, on the other hand, can lead to brain damage and even death. You should never shake your baby, even when you are tired, frustrated, and angry.

# Use Pacifiers to Keep Your Baby Calm Between Feedings

Once your fussy baby begins to settle down from the swaddle, side position, shushing and swinging, then it's time for the *icing on the cake*. The fifth and glorious S is *sucking*. Sucking is important to ensure that the calming reflex lasts and that your baby doesn't just start wailing again. For babies, to suck is to survive. This is why the best sucking tool for a newborn baby is a mother's nipple and is why you should focus on nutritive sucking first. A baby must drink three ounces per pound of body weight, for an adult this would be equivalent to drinking five gallons of whole milk every day! This is why breastfeeding is vital to ensure that your baby stays healthy and calm!

Once your baby has mastered the art of breastfeeding, you should begin to utilize pacifiers to calm your baby between meals. Not only is it hard for your baby to scream with a pacifier in his mouth, but sucking also has a deep effect within your baby's nervous system. It triggers his calming reflex and releases natural chemicals within his brain, which leads to a satisfying level of relaxation that can be triggered in a matter of mere minutes. So if your baby is hungry, she'll likely only suck a pacifier for a minute before crying out of hunger. However, if your baby only wants comfort, then she will happily suck on a pacifier for a good long while.

But can a young baby suck too much? Some people caution that sucking is habit-forming, luckily, young babies can't suck too much. It's not like an addiction; instead, it is a self-calming tool that is an integral part of the fourth trimester and one of your baby's first steps toward self-reliance. Furthermore, many studies have proven that non-nutritive sucking is healthy for babies! It lessens stress and releases natural pain-relieving chemicals in a baby's brain. Scientists have also found that premature babies who suck pacifiers grow faster, and full-term babies who use pacis have a lower risk of SIDS.

Still, many parents and grandparents worry a pacifier may teach a baby bad habits. In reality, a pacifier is simply a tool to help calm your baby until she can do it herself. However, there are some potential pacifier problems that you should try to steer clear of. The first is nipple confusion. When a baby sucks on a rubber nipple, she often uses a lazy, biting motion that requires less effort and coordination than sucking on a breast. As a result, a pacifier could teach a baby an improper way to use her mouth muscles. To avoid nipple confusion, bottles and pacifiers should only be introduced two to three weeks after birth, or longer if there are any breastfeeding problems.

Next, there is a risk of chemical contamination. Therefore, you should buy clear silicone pacifiers instead of yellow rubber ones. Yellow rubber gets sticky and deteriorates after a while, which may release tiny amounts of unwanted chemical residue. You should also avoid dipping pacifiers in syrup or honey to get your baby to suck on it more eagerly. In fact, such sweeteners can lead to botulism, causing temporary paralysis, and even death. You should also keep it clean. Before using a new pacifier, wash it well with soap and hot water. Rinse it when it falls on the floor and avoid sucking on your baby's pacifier to clean it with your mouth, your saliva could spread colds, herpes, or other illnesses.

You should never hang a pacifier around your baby's neck. Strings and ribbons may get caught around her fingers and cut off circulation, or even wrap around her throat and choke her. Lastly, once your baby reaches four to five months of age, try to get rid of the pacifier. At that time, your baby can begin sucking her fingers or other things to calm herself. At six months, stopping the pacifier becomes more difficult because your baby will have started a close emotional relationship with her "paci," much like a security blanket.

# Use the Cuddle Cure By Implementing All 5 S's

Now that you've got the five "S's" down, it's time to put them to use. Some babies will be calmed with just one "S" but most need several "S's" to calm down. This is where the *cuddle cure* comes in, which is a technique for combining all 5 "S's" into a "recipe for baby bliss." For instance, once on a flight from New York to L.A., Dr. Karp watched as an elderly woman calmed a baby with such precise, elegant moves that it seemed as if he was witnessing an ancient ballet. Mid-flight, the woman soothed her wailing granddaughter by nestling the little girl's stomach against her shoulder, making a continuous *shhhh* sound in the baby's ear, and rhythmically thumping her bottom. She swayed her torso side to side like a snake, and in less than a minute, the tiny baby was sound asleep.

Some people may witness this and believe that this grandmother simply has "the gift;" however, this is not the case. Soothing young infants has nothing to do with special talents, but everything to do with understanding why babies cry and learning the best practices to soothe them. The Cuddle Cure combines all 5 "S's" into a technique so powerful it engages the baby's calming reflex, even in the fussiest babies. Of course, getting down the 5 "S's" may not feel natural at first, it seems complicated and intimidating; in fact, some parents give up after a few tries, thinking "this may work for some kids but our baby hates it."

It is certainly frustrating, so let's go through the important aspects of each step to help you become "the best cuddler on the block." Swaddling, remember, is not necessarily meant to calm your baby, its purpose is to stop his flailing and to help him pay attention to the other "S's" which will soothe him. To swaddle correctly, keep your baby's arms straight down at his sides, with each fold of the swaddle, tuck and snug the blanket as tightly as possible. After swaddling, don't allow the blanket to loosen and pop back open. Next, lie your baby on his side a bit toward his stomach to help trigger the calming reflex. Make sure your baby isn't hungry when putting

your baby in this position as this might just confuse and frustrate your baby even more.

Next, the *shhhh* sound should be at a volume that is a bit louder than your baby's screams. Remember, the sounds in the womb are louder than a vacuum cleaner and your infant's ears naturally muffle the sound for the first few months. And if you choose to use a machine for white noise, place it one to two feet from your baby's head so it's loud enough to trigger the calming reflex. Next, you'll want to incorporate swinging which means moving your fussy baby in quick, teensy, shiver-like wiggles. Slow, wide moves may keep a baby asleep, but they won't be vigorous enough to calm a crying infant. It's important to support your baby's head and neck, but hold his head a little loosely so it can jiggle like Jell-O in your hands.

Lastly, sucking will be the icing on the cake to calm a fussy baby. If your baby rejects the pacifier, make sure he is calm first. Many babies won't take a pacifier while they are screaming. Try different brands, some babies prefer a particular shape. Use reverse psychology. Gently tug on the pacifier as soon as he begins to suck it. He'll resist you, and the more you tug, the sooner you'll train his mouth to keep a good long grip on the pacifier. Ultimately, practice makes perfect and patience is key. As you get better, your baby will only get better too as he learns to recognize what you are doing and learns that he likes it. If you persevere and stay consistent, you can become one hundred percent successful!

# Final Summary

When your baby is born, he enters the fourth trimester. This is the first three months of life in which your newborn is trying to adjust to life outside the comfort of the womb. As a result, they cry to ensure their needs are being met, which can become a frustrating experience for both the parents and the baby. Luckily, you can trigger your baby's calming reflex by simulating the safe environment of the womb using the five "S's:" swaddling, side position, shushing, swinging, and sucking. This may take time to master, but practice makes perfect. Soon, soothing your baby will become second nature!





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