Having spent some recent time with my newest granddaughter, I am again reminded of the power of a crying infant.

While Lauren is generally a happy baby whose lopsided grin and soft coos draw people to admire her, she also has a deafening cry. And I can attest to the fact that her bellowing motivates those around her to find a solution.

A baby’s passionate cry stirs up her caregivers’ passionate response. Heart rates increase and parents are stirred from even the soundest sleep. We are biochemically programmed to respond to such a cry.

When a baby cries, adults will do everything in their power to make the crying stop. A wailing baby becomes an unreasonable despot whose demands will be obeyed at any cost. It’s as if the world stops turning until the situation can be brought under control. Dishes pile up in the sink and phone calls go unanswered as parents experiment with strategy after strategy to bring peace.

When parents are unable to soothe, it shakes them to their core. They question their very fitness for raising children. The frustration urges them to invest evermore energy into their babies. Determined to offer relief, they work ferociously to find the position or nourishment or other comfort which will quiet the shrieks. Nursing, bouncing, swaddling, offering a pacifier, playing soft music—these and other efforts will be offered generously by frantic parents.

And then, when parents are finally able to soothe, it reinforces their sense of competence. They begin to experience the gratification that perhaps they are getting to know their babies and will be capable parents after all. The baby’s relief is paralleled by his parents’.

Sometimes absolutely nothing works to stop the wailing. Even in those times, a parent’s ongoing efforts to comfort teach a baby that his parents love him when he is not so lovable.

Some babies cry more and some cry less, but all babies cry at times. And thank goodness for that. Crying is infants’ chief means of communication. Without it, how could they tell us when they are hungry or in pain?

But some crying seems to communicate poorly, and is probably related to the infant’s need to blow off steam as he learns to manage living in his own body. This crying, which seems more difficult to calm with feeding or other comforting measures, creates stress in babies’ caregivers.

It seems that nature has designed this dramatic exchange in order to ensure that parents reorder their lives to make a place for this new child who has joined them. My friend and mentor T. Berry Brazelton says that “crying creates parents” because it requires such a deep investment of energy.

If caring for an infant was easy, parents might continue with their former priorities, lives virtually unchanged. But crying is one way that infants can stop the world around them, insisting that a place be made for them.

This powerful basic function causes us to recognize (and rightly so!) that with the birth of every new person, our planet is changed.

And even if I hadn’t already been willing to accommodate her in my life, Lauren’s crying reminds me that my relationship with her is worth a few hours of walking the floor. Years of joy will follow my meager attempts to help this dear newborn find peace.

Claudia Quigg is Founder and Executive Director of Baby TALK www.babytalk.org. Contact her at cquigg@babytalk.org

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