

Infants & Toddlers

BY ALICE STERLING HONIG, PH.D.

“What’s Going On?”

How to hold squirming babies

Dear Alice: “When I hold a certain baby, she just squirms and wiggles and doesn’t seem to want to be held. I can’t seem to find a position that she’s comfortable with. What’s going on?”

First, think about how long this baby has been in your care. If it has only been a short while, the baby may not yet be used to the feel of your arms, or the touch of your hands. If this is the case, just be patient. As you develop a loving, close, tuned-in relationship with this baby, she will become more and more familiar with the special way you hold her. She will grow accustomed to the way your body moves as you carry her from one place to another.

Time for Holding

It’s possible that this baby has not had enough experience being held. Some babies are placed in cribs, car seats, high chairs, baby swings, or walkers far more than they are held in arms. They may not be used to cuddling arms and personal touch. During the first year of life, babies need to be held, stroked, cuddled in arms or laps, and draped on shoulders as much as possible. You’re right to be concerned about the baby’s discomfort. It might help if you ask her family what a typical weekend day is like for this baby. How often does someone hold her on a hip while going about household chores? How many opportunities do the busy parents have to hold her and rock back and forth as they croon to her or talk to her in their arms? Some parents lead hectic lives and may not realize how much holding a baby needs.

Sensory Integration Difficulties

Another possibility is that this baby has some “sensory integration difficulties.” Some babies with such sensitivities react with discomfort to certain sounds, scents, and touches. Indeed, if their reaction to touch is to behave as if they are very distressed, then these babies may feel better if carried on a soft cushion rather than in someone’s arms. Babies with “sensory integration” troubles can react by squirming and protesting if their clothing doesn’t “feel right.” Because they may be very sensitive to clothing that doesn’t feel comfortable, it’s best to dress them in soft cottons. A second rinse after washing clothes may be necessary so that there is absolutely no soap residue left in the clothing that can irritate baby’s skin.

A Firm Touch

Sometimes babies will fuss if a touch is too light and gentle. They feel the need for deeper, firmer touches. When you hold a baby with such sensitivities, be sure to put her cheek firmly against your cheek as you put her to your shoulder. Let her feel the deep pressure of this firm touch.

Calming Care

If this baby is fairly new to your care, try using touch to settle her in for a nap. Rub her back with smooth, firm, round strokes or reassuring, rhythmic pats. During sleepy times, she may accept back rubs and pats more easily than other touches or hugs. Also try carrying her at your shoulder. Babies often exhibit a “neurological alert” when put on a shoulder. If your face is still not too familiar to her, she may not fuss or squirm as much in this position. In addition, she will widen her eyes and alertly look all around. If her squirming turns out to be because she is slow to warm up to a new teacher, these “tips” may decrease her feelings of strangeness and increase her feelings of comfort with the ways you hold and carry her.

Moving Freely

Another possibility is that this baby has been restrained when held and not allowed to move freely. For example, holding both hands while trying to get spoonfuls of food into their mouths prevents babies from grabbing at the spoon and trying to participate in the feeding process. Some parents are not comfortable with how messy this can be, but it may cause babies to interpret being held as a form of restraining their body movements. If this is the case, be sure to give baby lots of “floor time” on her tummy, on a warm, safe surface. This will give her a chance to move her limbs rhythmically on her own. Put an interesting rattle near her hand, where she only has to stretch to get the toy to bang or shake it. Once she starts to associate your tender care with giving her freedom of limb movements, she may be far more accepting of your style of holding.

No matter what the reason for her fussing, your patient, calm acceptance will help the baby adjust in time. As she learns to feel safely held, talked to, admired, and comfortably cared for, she will gradually relax and enjoy her special position – held lovingly in your arms!

Sidebar:

How to Hold a Baby

- Very little babies do well when held both firmly under their bottom and with one hand under the wobbly head, protecting it from falling back. When a baby is held this way and you bring her within 12-18 inches of your face, this is called the “en face” holding position. This is an ideal position for having cooing conversations with young babies!
- There are various ways to hold a baby, depending on the teacher’s goal. If a very young baby is going to be nursed, wrapping her in a receiving blanket sometimes helps baby calm down so that she can better concentrate on nursing from bottle or breast. Swaddling often helps babies calm their flailing limbs during the early months. Older babies like a variety of holds. A tiny baby may feel safe when swaddled and tucked under your arm in “football position” as you carry her over to a chair for nursing.

- Many babies over 6 months love to perch on your arm and survey the world. They love to be hiked up on your chest and then draped over a shoulder. If you are sitting in a rocking chair and gently rocking, a baby loves to be “molded” over your tummy as you hold him in place on your lap and gently rub his back.
- Older babies who sit comfortably and easily, will love to be held on the shoulders of a trusted adult. When you pick up a baby from a diapering table, hug her closely so that your faces touch. Some babies feel uncomfortable being held out and away from a teacher’s body. That does not feel as safe to her as when you put your cheek really close to hers as you settle her firmly on your chest. Play with different ways of holding until you find a way that satisfies each baby.

Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University, is the author of many books, including Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant-Toddler Attachments in Early Care Settings (NAEYC, 2002; \$15) and, with H. Brophy, Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School (Syracuse University Press, 1996; \$16.95).