

FUSSY BABIES

Parenthood is full of wonderful stories. Every now and then when I talk with frazzled parents about their frustrations I am reminded of my life as a new parent. Some of these times were not my proudest moments. Parenthood is difficult. Parenthood is a humbling experience.

My first child was born almost eleven years ago. For the first couple of weeks we were barricaded in the house, treading water, and simply trying to get through the night just like every other family with a newborn. One day when she was a month old, we decided that I would “mind the fort” while she slept to allow my wife to go on her first baby-free trip to her sister’s house. The plan was simple: when she woke up, we would come join them. After all, it was just a ten minute drive away.

At that point, I had been a pediatrician for about 8 years. I had calmed hundreds of crying babies. I had changed zillions of diapers. I had even completed a pediatric oncology fellowship, so I felt pretty confident about handling stress. As I said, parenthood is a humbling experience.

My daughter woke up in the foulest of moods – the kind of mood that only a mother can calm. To be blunt, she was always an extremely colicky baby, but we knew that a ride in the car usually did the trick. So, all I had to do was make it to the car, right? Getting her into the car seat was one of the worst fifteen minutes of my life. I guess I could have just forced her into the car seat, but we all know it is not that easy. It took a little rocking, a little dancing, a little singing, and a little fairy dust to get her calmed down and into the seat. Then she pooped. No big deal. I got her out, got her changed, and then tried the whole thing all over again.

This time, it went on and on and on. I know what you are thinking, but I had already tried that – she was not hungry, or at least, she was not going to take any milk from me. After another eternity of high-pitched screaming, I finally got her calmed down and back into the car seat. Then she pooped again. I mean she dropped a bomb! This was not just a regular poop (no doubt, some experienced parents are nodding right now, because they know exactly what I am talking about). It was everywhere. I have no idea how some of it wound up where it did. It was awful.

So, the next stop was the bathtub. Unfortunately, taking a bath was perhaps her least favorite activity. Somewhere along the way, I made it to the phone and let my wife know that we were not coming. After all, the car seat cover was in the washing machine. That was the official excuse. Of course, the real reason was that I, a patient and experienced pediatrician, needed help.

Fortunately, I had only a handful of these situations, along with a few stories that seem pretty funny ten years later. On the other hand, my wife had the pleasure of handling this

sort of thing on a regular basis. It was certainly much harder for her to take a break. To put it mildly, dealing with a fussy baby can be unnerving.

Most parents have a few stories like this one, and a lot of them are probably more extreme than mine. However, this is supposed to be more than just a funny story. The point is that caring for a newborn can be challenging, even for someone who feels confident and thinks that he or she can handle anything. Anyone can do it for a while, but even one hour of it can push even an experienced parent to the limits of sanity. You have to be able to take a break! All of the new dads out there need to remember that when you come home at the end of a long, hard day, your wife has probably had a harder day.

Sometimes, babies cry for no apparent reason (or at least no reason that we can easily figure out). We all know the checklist. Is she hungry? Does he have a dirty diaper? Is it gas? Is she simply over-stimulated? Is something really wrong? Sometimes, the answer is either “maybe” or “none of the above”.

It would be nice if we could come up with satisfying explanations for all of those fussy episodes, but reality is not that easy. When parents cannot figure out the cause, it usually gets blamed on gas. When it happens over and over, it gets blamed on either reflux or teething. If only it were that easy. Although there are occasional exceptions, most colicky babies do not have reflux problems, they are not teething, and they are usually not reacting to something in their mother’s diet.

I think that a fair amount of fussiness can be blamed on sensory overload, which is to say that newborns are not used to the sensations that we all have (noises, bright light, touch, and yes, gas pain), and it can be overwhelming until they do get used to it all. Infants are emotionally immature as well as physically immature, which means that when they get worked up they have a hard time calming back down, even when the original cause was relatively minor.

Most parents eventually figure out a few things that can usually calm their babies. It may be a favorite song, a swing, a specific body position, a particular dance, a ride in the car, or a jiggle that only one person can do just right. Even when you are doing what usually works, sometimes nothing works.

New parents are in survival mode, which includes taking sanity breaks. If you have a fussy baby, one parent needs to be “off the clock” (out of the house) whenever possible. Go for a walk or have coffee with friends – it will make you a better parent in the end!