

By Barbara Holden

You want what is best for your practically perfect bundle of joy. After all, he's going to grow up to be the strongest, smartest, kindest kiddo on the block and there's nothing he can't do if he puts his mind to it.

All of that is true of course – our children are going to grow up and change the world. But for the first years of life babies are babies, so it's important to understand how to parent and love that future world leader based on realistic expectations of his natural development.

Too often, unrealistic expectations of a baby's abilities and timeline for learning new skills lead to flared tempers, hurtful words and even physical violence. Just days ago here in Memphis, two more babies died due to physical abuse at the hands of unprepared and unsuitable caregivers.

KidsHealth.org says physical abuse of infants due to over discipline is almost always at the hands of caregivers who shake or hit the baby out of irritation or stress.

This is why choosing who cares for your baby may be a life or death decision. And just because you understand that a crying infant is normal doesn't mean that everyone else in your family and circle of friends do.

Dr. Leon D. Calwell of Rhodes College says that although abuse knows no gender, estimates find the perpetrators are increasingly male, usually the baby's father or the mother's boyfriend.

“The tragedies over the weekend are a clarion call that our communities must take seriously the roles that men play in the lives of children,” he said. “Investments in interventions that provide skills to men in child rearing are necessary considering the overwhelming number of them who may not have ever experienced healthy fathering or any fathering at all.”

Hallie Cohen, the Family Services Coordinator at the Exchange Club Family Center, says that many caregivers simply don't know what a baby is supposed to be able to do and at what age, which makes for discouraged or angry parents.

“Some parents think that 10-week-old should be able to just stop crying, that a six-month-old should be potty trained, or that a two-year-old should be able to sit still in the Macy's dressing room,” she said. “Parents get frustrated when their child cannot meet those expectations, which causes them to lose their temper and over discipline.”

Cohen says that the most common frustration among caregivers is the constant and sometimes inconsolable crying. “It's vital that caregivers understand crying is normal.”

Babies don't have a vocabulary so they will cry when they need something – even if that something is nothing more than just to be held and loved by someone. “Being cuddled is a completely valid and essential need for a baby,” Cohen stressed.

And don't listen to those folks who tell you not to console your baby too much. Experts agree that you can't "spoil" an infant since being held by you is essential to your baby's brain development.

Of course, holding, feeding, changing or rocking him doesn't guarantee that he will stop crying. When you're providing for your family, getting little sleep and adjusting to being a new parent those inconsolable crying bouts can really test your patience -- and your temper.

When you feel yourself reaching the end of your rope, put your baby safely in his crib and leave the room for a few minutes while you regain your composure. Better to let him cry on his own than to do or say something hurtful.

Remember that if you choose to leave your baby with someone he or she must be a person you trust who also understands children and how care for them. If they don't know or don't want to know, then don't leave your child with that person.

The bottom line is that no matter how aggravated a caregiver gets, taking it out by hitting, verbally abusing or shaking your baby is never okay. It's not an option. Your child's safety must come first.

You can learn about appropriate developmental expectations and healthier ways of parenting at the Exchange Club Family Center parenting classes. Call 901-276-2200 for more info or visit www.exchangeclub.net.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.