

Leaving baby to cry could damage brain development, parenting guru claims

Neurobiologists say high levels of stress hormone cortisol are 'toxic' to the developing brain, according to Penelope Leach

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Leaving a distressed baby to cry on a regular basis could be damaging to the developing brain, according to parenting guru Penelope Leach, whose new book will be seen as a head-on confrontation with the tough-love approach of baby experts such as Gina Ford, who say parents should "train" their infants by allowing them to cry themselves to sleep.

In the latest salvo in the baby wars, Leach brings science to her aid, which she says has progressed remarkably in recent years. Using saliva swab tests, scientists have been able to measure high levels of the stress hormone cortisol in distraught babies whose cries elicit no response from parent or carer. Neurobiologists say, according to Leach, that high cortisol levels are "toxic" to the developing brain.

"It is not an opinion but a fact that it's potentially damaging to leave babies to cry. Now we know that, why risk it?" Leach says in her book, *The Essential First Year - What Babies Need Parents to Know*.

She is not, she tells the Guardian, saying it is bad for babies to cry. "All babies cry. Some cry more than others." But crying, in the first year or so, is the only way a baby can get a response. Denying a response, she argues, can have long-term emotional consequences.

"We are dealing with the expectations that a baby's brain is building up. The reason babies raised on strict routine regimens go to sleep, usually with less and less crying, is because they are quicker and quicker to give up. Their brain has adapted to a world where they are not responded to," she says. "That kind of early-induced anxiety may relate to anxiety right through adult life."

Ford's theories on parenting tend to be loved or loathed. Known as the Queen of Routine, Ford - a trained nanny who has not had children of her own - advocates strict routines to train the child into a regular feeding, waking and sleeping pattern. She advises that parents can leave a baby to cry for a while if he is clean and fed and burped. When they put a baby down to sleep at night, they can return if he cries but must not make eye contact. *The Contented Little Baby Book* was published in 1999 and continues to be a best-seller.

But Leach says babies cry for a reason - their lungs do not need the exercise. Babies, she says, are not capable of blackmail in their first year or 18 months, even though it may feel that way to their parents sometimes. And leaving them to cry themselves to sleep is very hard on a parent too, she says.

"If there is a point to writing this book at all, it is that it can be so much more comfortable for babies as well as parents," she says.

"This is what I don't like about the opposite school, which goes for ease for the parents. It is so hard on everybody. We don't have a lot of research showing that a lot of seven-year-olds are desperately more anxious. But I have seen mothers really struggling with the system."

She says she knows of no research in the world that supports a system of leaving babies to cry. "I don't believe there is the science," she says.

She understands the attraction of the theories of Ford and others. Being a parent in the modern world, where the pace of life is unrelentingly fast, is very difficult, she says. Some want to know how they can make their baby fit into their lives, rather than disrupting them, as soon as possible.

But, says Leach - acknowledging it is contentious - "If you really, really don't want a baby to make any difference, you could try not having one."

Leach is an honorary senior research fellow at the Tavistock Clinic and the Institute for the Study of Children, Family and Social Issues. She has co-directed the UK's largest research project into different forms of child care for the under-fives. Her own research work, she says, has shown that having a mother, father or carer who responds to the baby is a crucial factor in their development, outweighing the effects of poverty and disadvantage.

"We found that in our own child-care research. We followed 1,200 mother and baby pairs from birth to state school. We were surprised to find that differences in child care do not make nearly as much difference as we expected them to. What makes more difference is the carer's responsiveness."

She is not talking about the mother who can't get to the cot for five minutes after the baby has started to cry and she would not, indeed, accuse mothers of an earlier generation who left the pram at the bottom of the garden of neglecting their children.

"But you can tell by sound and, quite frankly, by sight whether a baby is working herself into a lather," she says.

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