

what your baby's trying to tell you

**How to know
whether
he's tired,
hungry—
or something
else entirely**

by Katherine Lee
Photographs by Laurie Frankel

I'm willing to bet there are very few moms who haven't had a moment like this: My son, Sam, at 5 weeks, had been changed, fed, and burped. He'd even napped earlier that day. The room wasn't too cold or too hot. There wasn't a single thing I could think of that would make him upset—except he was. He was crying incessantly, and nothing I tried—breastfeeding, singing, holding him in my arms as I walked back and forth—was helping. It was nearly 11:00 at night, and I'd been trying to put him to sleep for hours. At my wits' end, I was literally on my knees, cradling my newborn son and pleading, "What do you want, Sam?"

It took me a couple more weeks of bleary-eyed desperation to figure out what he needed to help him fall asleep: some soothing Bach to listen to, with about ten minutes of swaying back and forth in a baby carrier while resting his head on my chest. Soon after that, he made the transition to falling asleep with just the music. The euphoria at having cleared this new-mommy hurdle was like nothing I've ever experienced.

One of the most challenging things about caring for infants is that they're unable to say, "Mama, I really think I need to be held for a few minutes before I go down for my nap." It's like playing 20 Questions, only with few or no answers to guide you. The trick is to learn how to read your baby's cues so that you can figure out what he's trying to



It's personal
Some babies
take things in
stride; others
are just more
reactive

communicate to you in the only way he can—through behavior and body language. It won't happen overnight, but with some basic knowledge and patience (and let's face it, some luck) you'll get a better handle on his ups and downs.

What no one told you

Throughout my pregnancy, I read everything I could get my hands on to prepare for the birth of my baby and to care for and bond with him. I pictured myself instinctively knowing what he would need by the sound of his cry or the look on his face—which is, no joke, what some books suggested would happen.

But while I did eventually figure out certain things as we settled into something roughly resembling a routine—that he was cranky because he might be hungry or sleepy, for instance—there were often times, especially in the first few months, when he wasn't a happy camper and I simply had no clue what was wrong. Let alone how to fix it.

As it turns out, my experience is much more common than I thought. But that doesn't mean you're doomed to be clueless whenever your baby starts fussing or crying. You'll

certainly hear distinct types of cries—those that are softer and quieter and seem more like a baby's way of saying, "Excuse me, but I think I need you to..." and those others that are louder and more demanding, of the "Come here right now!" sort. Harvey Karp, M.D., author of *The Happiest Baby on the Block*, defines three:

- whimpering
- crying
- shrieking

When I first heard the sound of Sam's piercing wail after he rolled off the bed and hit his head on the hardwood floor when he was 7 months old (my mom, who'd been playing with him, had looked away for an instant), no one had to tell me that this was an "I'm hurt" call. I'll never forget the way I felt when I heard it: Even though I was down the hall, in the bathroom with the door shut, my body and mind went into full red alert, as if an alarm had gone off in my ear. While figuring out what that cry meant was easy, as hard as I tried, I could never really tell the difference between an "I'm hungry" cry and an "I wanna be picked up now" call to arms just by listening. >>

The temperament twist

Some babies are more easygoing than others, which can influence how easy it is to figure out what they're trying to communicate. For instance, says Dr. Karp, if a generally happy-go-lucky baby is hungry, she's more likely to whimper and then escalate to crying only if someone doesn't respond. Chances are that a loud, piercing cry from a baby with this kind of personality is a signal that she's really in pain. But with a generally fussy baby, it might be more difficult to tell what's bothering her because she's prone to going straight to a shriek whether the problem is hunger, boredom, or something more serious. "When my three-year-old, Steven, was a baby, it was never obvious what he wanted," says Natalie Dixon, a mom of two in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. "He didn't have a middle ground—he went from contentment to full-force wailing."

Raising siblings with different temperaments

How your baby figures you out

You may be trying like mad to decipher his coos and cries, but he's just learning to understand you, too. You can communicate your love and comfort through:

Touch Now that he's out of the constant motion of the womb, swaddling, rocking, and stroking are great ways to tell him he's safe.

Smell Babies are comforted by your scent, so holding him close to your chest and, of course, nursing can go a long way in soothing your newborn.

Sound Moms tend instinctively to sing to their babies or speak to them in a high-pitched, rhythmic way, which hits the spot. Does your baby smile when you hum a special song or use a certain tone? If so, go with it.

sometimes gives parents unique insight into just how much a child's personality matters. "My son had fits almost every day, and we didn't know why," recalls Jill Bigelow, a mom from Brooklyn, who characterizes her son, Adam, now 7, as strong-willed, and her daughter, Nina, 2, as easy. "With Adam, it was frustrating. I couldn't figure out if he was tired, hungry, or wanted a toy. Nina goes with the flow. Even if I can't guess exactly what she wants—a particular book, for instance—we can still make her happy. It may not be quite what she wanted, but it's just as good."

You can, however, mistakenly chalk up a more serious problem as just a case of temperament. "My first son, Justin, now two, was a predictable baby. He ate often, liked to be in the car or stroller, and was easily entertained," says Jennifer Levitan of Framingham, Massachusetts. "I

was usually able to meet his needs. If he was unhappy, I'd quickly scroll through a mental checklist: Did he poop? Does he want this toy or that one?" But her younger son, Ryan, now 10 months, was a whole other story. "We tried everything—swaddling, front carriers, the swing," she says. "If he wasn't eating or sleeping, he was crying."

When Ryan was about 7 weeks, Levitan took him to the pediatrician because he was throwing up entire feedings and arching his back and pushing away when it was time to eat. "This was my second baby, so I knew something was wrong," she says. The doctor diagnosed acid reflux and colic and prescribed medication, which cleared up the digestive problem. "He continued to be fussy until he was about five months old, when the colic finally subsided," says Levitan. "After that, he was a very different baby—easygoing and laid-back like my first child."

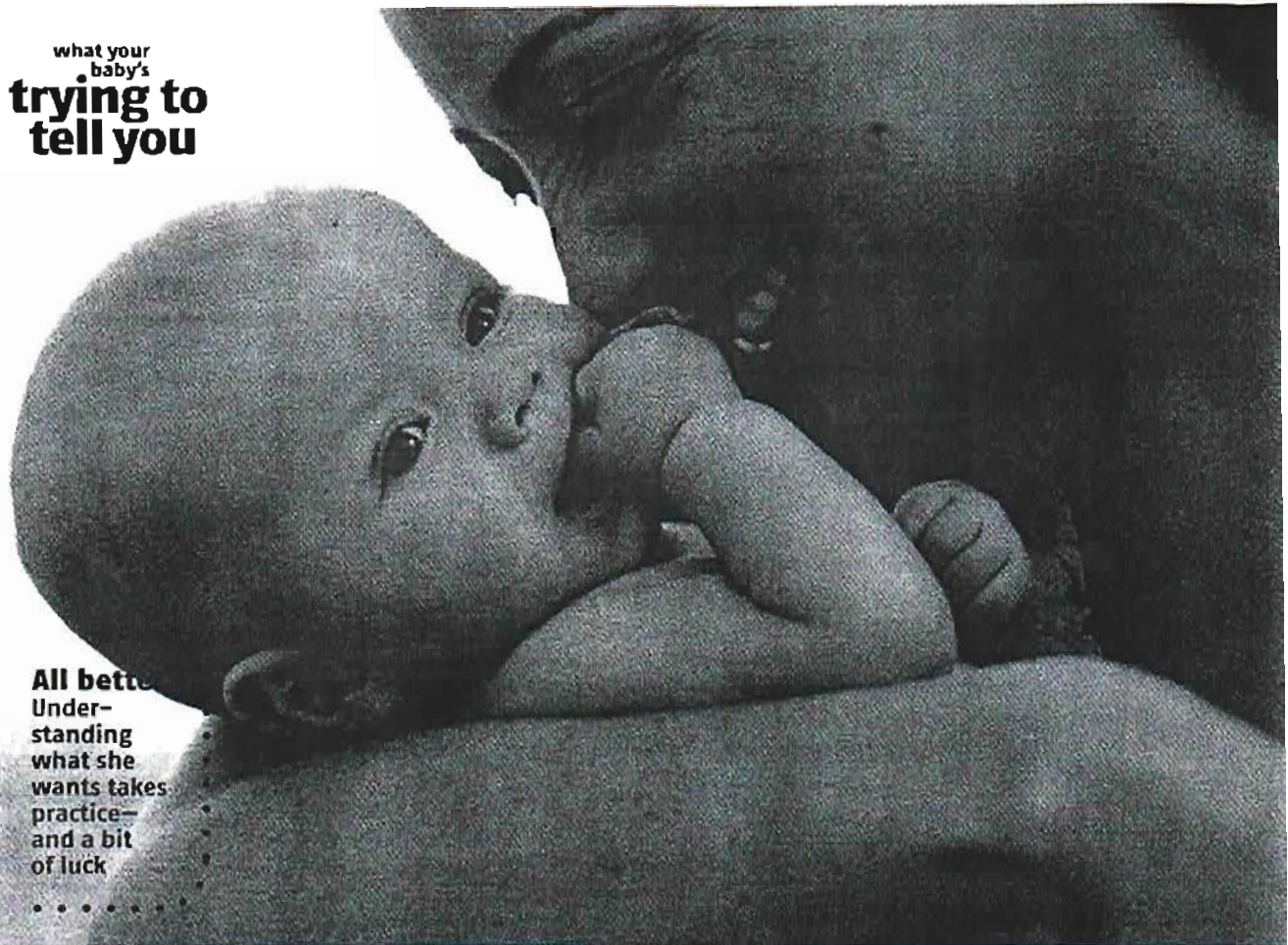
While you may not always understand everything your baby is trying to get across, no one knows your child like you do. That's why it's important to go with your gut when it comes to interpreting her.

When Sam was 14 months old, I took him to the doctor because he was fussing in a way that seemed unusual to me, but not to my babysitter (a seasoned mom herself). Somehow, his behavior was different from his everyday crankiness—for one, he was pushing his food away, something my eager-to-eat boy rarely did. Sam turned out to have a rare condition called epiglottitis, an infection in the back of the throat that leads to breathing problems. He had to be rushed to the ER and admitted to the hospital.

Guessing—and guessing again

As Sam more or less settled into a schedule (feeding in the morning, a stroll outside, lunch, nap, and so on) and I got to know his likes and dislikes (constant adoration and attention, yes; being ignored, even for just a few minutes, a definite no), I began to figure out some of the things he was trying to tell me.

That said, many parents know that what works well one day—sometimes one minute—may not work the next. "With Ryan, it was constant trial and error," says Levitan. "We put him in a swing, which settled him for several minutes. Then we tried strapping him in his infant seat and swinging him to see if going higher and faster would do the trick. It did for a while—but then we had to come up with something else." >>



All better
Under-
standing
what she
wants takes
practice—
and a bit
of luck

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And sometimes the best strategy is to know when to do nothing. "I came to the realization that it was out of my hands—Ryan was just going to cry," says Levitan. "I also took the advice of friends who said, 'Put him in the bassinet and take a shower; he may not quiet down, but he's safe.'"

There may be times when he just needs to have a bawl. "When babies holler, we want to know the reason because otherwise we feel helpless," says Dixon. "But sometimes, they're just having a bad day. I'll do a full body check on my daughter, Emma [18 months] to make sure there isn't something irritating her, and then I let her have a cry."

Who figures it out?

Typically, the parent who stays home and spends more time with the baby is the one who becomes the translator. Stay-at-home dad Davide Cantoni, of New York City, was the one who usually sussed out what son Orlando wanted. Says Cantoni, "Since a lot of it was guesswork based on routine and time spent together, his mom was at a disadvantage." Cantoni's wife, Allison Thomas, agrees, and made an effort to figure out what Orlando was trying to tell her without constantly running to her husband for guidance.

Tina Morris of Montclair, New Jersey, remembers coming home to find her baby daughter in tears and her husband trying desperately to figure out what was wrong. She'd forgotten to tell him about something new she'd

observed in their child. "I noticed that Allison needed another ounce or two from her bottle to give her a little comfort before she went down for a nap, even if she wasn't hungry," says Morris. "My husband couldn't imagine that's what she needed because he'd just fed her recently."

But time with the baby isn't always a formula for understanding her better. Sometimes, it's a grandparent or someone else who's not in charge of the day-to-day caregiving who comes in with fresh eyes and figures out what an infant wants. "When my daughter was a newborn, I kept her hat on her head out of habit because that's what they did at the hospital," says Amy Miracle, of Toledo. "Then when my mother-in-law was visiting one day, she noticed that Paige was tugging at it. She guessed—correctly—that Paige wanted the hat off."

The way your baby communicates improves as she grows, and so does your ability to understand her. And before you know it, your gurgling, cooing infant will move on to asking you "But why?" 5,000 times a day and shouting, "That's not fair!" as she stomps to her room. Then you can look at the bright side of those stages of development (it means she's curious, independent, and good at expressing her feelings!), take a deep breath, and hope, once more, for a mom-size dose of patience. ■

Katherine Lee writes frequently about parenting.