

The High Need Baby Fact Sheet

THE FUSSY BABY SITE



What is a High Need Baby?

- Research carried out in the 1950's and 60's found that 10% of babies had what was called a “difficult” temperament. These babies were found to be unpredictable in terms of feeding, sleeping and bodily functions, had intense reactions, tended to be grumpy and easily frustrated, and cried often (Thomas, Chess, & Birch, 1970).
- These babies were also found to be loud both in terms of crying and laughing, were prone to tantrums, and required their parents to be very consistent and tolerant in terms of their parenting style (Thomas, Chess, & Birch, 1970).
- Year later, Dr. William Sears (1996) came up with the term “high need baby” as a more positive way of describing these infants who had a more difficult temperament.

What Causes a Baby to be High Needs?

A number of studies have looked at whether stress, anxiety or depression during pregnancy could cause an infant to have a difficult temperament. Keep in mind that all studies done to date are correlational, meaning they don't prove causation. They also tend to rely on parental reports of the infants' temperament, which themselves can be strongly influenced by the mother's depression or anxiety.

- Factors that do not seem to predict a difficult infant temperament are the mother's age, income, level of education, marital status, the infant's gender or prematurity, or complications during pregnancy or childbirth (including breech delivery, emergency C-section, use of forceps or fetal distress) (Austin, Hadzi-Pavlovic, Leader, Saint, & Parker, 2005).

- One study showed that mothers with high levels of ongoing anxiety – known as “trait anxiety” (either alone, or with corresponding depression) - during pregnancy tended to have infants with more difficult temperaments at ages four-six months (Austin et al., 2005).
- However, this same study found that mothers who reported symptoms of depression (without ongoing anxiety), or high levels of stress during pregnancy due to a life event (e.g., moving, domestic violence, loss of a loved one, separation, etc.) did *not* tend to have infants with more difficult temperaments (Austin et al., 2005)
- **Researchers of this study note that because symptoms of ongoing anxiety are likely to persist once the baby is born, we don’t know whether parents were more likely to report having a difficult infant because of their own anxiety, or whether their anxiety during pregnancy actually contributed to the infant’s temperament** (Austin et al., 2005).
- One small study showed a relationship between high levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) late in pregnancy, and infants with more difficult behaviors including increased crying, fussing and negative facial expressions, as well as higher levels of emotion and activity (de Weerth, van Hees, & Buitelaar, 2003).
- However, this same study found that while these behaviors were most significant at ages one-seven weeks, the behaviors were significantly diminished by age 18 weeks, and by age four-five months, the infants’ behaviors were in line with infants born to mothers with low stress levels during pregnancy. **In other words, any effects of high cortisol during pregnancy appeared to be gone by 4-5 months** (de Weerth et al., 2003).
- Research by Werner et al. (2007) found that mothers who were diagnosed with depression or an anxiety disorder during pregnancy were four times more likely to have a “high crier” at age four months than mothers who weren’t diagnosed with a psychiatric illness.
- The authors of this study suggested three possible explanations for these findings: 1) Anxiety or depression in mothers and crying in infants may be the result of the mother and child having the same genetic emotional predisposition, 2) The baby’s increased crying was caused by the mother’s proneness to anxiety or depression, or 3) Women who struggled with depression or anxiety while pregnant continued to struggle after the baby was born (Werner et al., 2007).
- Parental distress may contribute to parents perceiving their child as fussy or difficult. Researchers aren’t surprised by this finding, and note that infant fussiness and parental distress “may provoke a vicious circle where infant difficultness increases parenting stress which, in turn, amplifies the perception of the infant as difficult” (Mantymaa, Puura, Luoma, Salmelin & Tamminen, 2006, p. 384).

What’s the Impact of Having a High Need Baby?

- Austin et al. (2005) found a significant correlation between postpartum depression and difficult infant temperament.
- In a study of mothers of 93 infants with colic, 45.2% of mothers reported having moderate to severe symptoms of depression (Maxted et al., 2005).
- Mothers who have a colicky baby and also suffer from intense symptoms of depression tend to experience increased stress, decreased family functioning and lower self-esteem (Maxted et al., 2005).

- In a non-academic survey of 1,408 parents who self-identified as having a high need baby, 62.3% reported having struggled with depression sometime since the birth of their child (Klaassen, 2016).
- Infants with a difficult temperament are far less likely to be exclusively breastfed throughout their first six months than more easygoing babies (Niegel, Ystrom, Hagtvet, & Vollrath, 2008).

Does Having a High Need Baby Impact the Parents' Relationship?

- Surprisingly, couples who have a strong relationship prior to having a baby may find their relationship even stronger after having an infant with a difficult temperament (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Szewczyk Sokolowski, 2007).
- However, couples who struggle with their relationship prior to having a baby are more likely to struggle in their co-parenting relationship after having a fussy baby (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007).
- Overall, an infant's temperament does not appear to have a *strong* effect on co-parenting quality, however it does have some influence (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007).

What do we Know About High Need Babies and Sleep?

- One study found that newborns who exhibited behaviors associated with a difficult temperament slept less than those who didn't (Kaley, Reid, & Flynn, 2012).
- Infants under one year of age who have a difficult temperament tend to experience more wakefulness at night than infants who have a more easygoing temperament (Sorondo & Reeb-Sutherland, 2015).
- Patterns of sleep in infants at one to two days of age may be predictive of temperament at eight months of age. Infants rated as "most difficult" at eight months had the most extreme ratings in terms of sleep in the first two days following birth (Novosad, Freudigman & Thoman, 1999).

How Can Parents Cope With a High Need Baby?

- Taking steps to treat a mother's ongoing anxiety while pregnant may reduce the likelihood that she will have an infant with a difficult temperament (Austin et al., 2005).
- Research shows that when parents of high need infants and young children provide emotional support and help build autonomy, those children outperform their peers academically and socially by grade one (Stright, Gallagher, & Kelley, 2008).
- When mothers use positive discipline (in particular, distraction), children with a difficult temperament tend to exhibit fewer negative outward behaviors (e.g., physical aggression, disobedience, etc.). (van Zeijl et al., 2007).
- In one study, mothers who learned to understand and respond sensitively to their difficult baby's cues experienced improved quality in the child/infant relationship, in the baby's ability to explore, and in the mother/child attachment (van den Boom, 1994).

Parenting a high need baby isn't easy! If you're looking for more information regarding high need babies, toddlers and preschoolers, check out my eBook, [The Fussy Baby Survival Guide](#). It answers questions like:

- How do I know if my baby is colicky, high need or something else entirely?
- Will my high need baby ever get easier, and WHEN?
- What are the most effective strategies for dealing with SLEEP & tantrums?



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