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How to be your own Baby Detective

AN EXAMPLE OF A BABY DETECTIVE INVESTIGATION

To begin with, I will share with you the procedure I follow when I arrive at the home of new clients, particularly if I am in the role of troubleshooter, where there is a specific problem.

I will explain exactly what I am doing to enable you to reproduce the same process yourselves when dealing with your own baby.

This procedure is not just for solving big problems, when things have gone seriously wrong; it is also for day-to-day fixing and tweaking and sorting out minor problems to prevent them from escalating into major disasters, and for thinking about and planning changes to your daily routine.

CASE STUDY

Two-week windy-baby troubleshooting job in London

BRIEF First baby, six weeks old. This breastfed baby apparently has colic, cries all the time and can't be put down in his Moses basket, needs holding to sleep. Dad works fairly long hours; mum is at home on maternity leave. Both parents are exhausted and desperate for help.

ENVIRONMENT After meeting the parents and noticing that they were practically grey with exhaustion, a quick glance around told me two things: first, that the normal state of the house seemed to be neat and tidy, with everything put away, but that baby stuff was randomly heaped around in piles, with little sense of organisation. This might not seem relevant, but it was an indication of an abnormal sense of chaos that would not help the parents' mood in general.

Second, it struck me that mum appeared to live on the sofa full-time. There were TV remotes, pillows, blankets, magazines, snacks, drinks, phone and iPad with chargers, breast pads, tablets, even a spare T-shirt. While this was practical, it suggested a siege situation, with mum trapped in one place, which was not great for her mental and emotional well-being.

As I went to wash my hands, I noticed that the pram was almost invisible under a pile of post, laundry and other stuff and didn't look very accessible, which was also unusual as prams are usually in pretty regular use.

I asked both parents what their days were like and they replied with the following:

Mum did indeed spend her whole life on the sofa, almost from the moment she got up to the moment she went to bed. She had everything she needed on hand because she didn't have the energy to go looking for things, and because once baby was asleep on her she didn't dare move in case he woke up and cried again (*trapped*).

Baby screamed in the pram so they didn't go for walks or get out to any baby groups or meet other mums (*isolated*).

Baby was so difficult and mum so tired that she rarely asked anyone round to visit; it was easier just to manage on her own (*lonely*).

She had daytime TV on all day for company (*bored*).

She ate snack food throughout the day, then they had a ready meal or takeaway in the evening so they could eat quickly in shifts while one of them held the baby (*poor nutrition*).

The day was bad enough, but they dreaded the nights even more (*sleep deprivation*).

Dad had to work, so he slept in the spare room during the week, leaving mum to deal with baby on her own (*possible cause of resentment*).

They were both stressed and exhausted and not enjoying their baby.

LIFE BEFORE BABY At this point it was important for me to ask what their normal, pre-baby life was like so that I could get a sense of how far off balance they were, and what it would take to get things more normal and comfortable for them. Questions were asked tactfully, and the replies listened to carefully without assumption or judgement.

They confirmed that they liked the house tidy and organised and loved to cook healthy food. They also loved to go out for walks, and enjoyed socialising both at home and out and about.

Mum, on her maternity leave, had enjoyed being active, hardly ever watched TV, but now baby had arrived desperately wanted to go out and do what other mums were doing, but felt like there was no dynamic to the day, just the same relentless feed, hold, feed, hold . . . a black pit of parenting.

As the parents were talking I watched their expressions and body language, and was heartened to see that though they were stressed, there was no anger towards the baby, and, more amazingly, no tension between each other. The situation had them working, as best they could, as a team, and the mum genuinely had no problem with the dad sleeping in the spare room. This was important because it would make finding and applying solutions so much easier if their own couple dynamic was sound.

It is important to note that during the discussion, I am listening without judgement, assumption or criticism, which you will find harder than you think when you try this for yourselves.

TYPICAL DAY I then asked them to talk me through a typical day, and listened and watched carefully to note any discrepancies between what they thought and said they were doing and what was actually happening. (Not because they were deliberately lying, but because they were inexperienced parents and in a fog of

exhaustion and confusion and it would be easier for an objective and experienced outsider to see things a little more clearly.)

They indicated that baby fed well to start with, but got progressively worse as the feed went on and even worse as the day progressed. He wouldn't settle down to play or sleep and was crying, wriggling or restless. If they got him to sleep in their arms and then tried to put him down in his moses basket, he woke up and screamed, and they had to start rocking, cuddling and soothing all over again, so they had pretty much stopped trying and just sat and held him so that he got some sleep.

This went on all day, and baby had major meltdown screaming sessions in the evening until they fed him to repletion and he fell into a deep sleep late at night. Then he went down in his moses basket and slept there for about three hours, but subsequently woke for a feed and started fussing and crying again, which meant that mum was up from about 3 a.m. feeding and holding baby and dozing in a chair because she was afraid of falling asleep with him in bed and rolling on him. They did try co-sleeping, but he cried when put down next to them, so they gave that up.

OBSERVATIONS The next step was for me to observe them feed baby, and I was relieved to see that that, at least, was going well. Mum's position was good, as was her technique for getting baby to latch. The latch itself was secure, and baby knew what to do: he got straight onto the breast and, after the initial let-down sucking (short, rapid sucks), he settled down to good, strong, rhythmical drinking and swallowing. There was nothing to fault there at all.

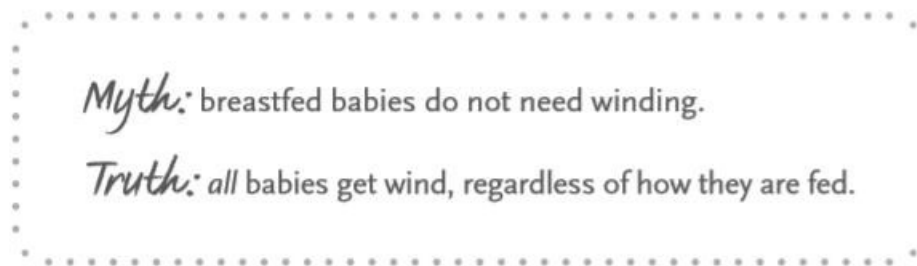
She kept him on the breast for as long as possible, because once he came off it was difficult to get him back on and sometimes that first part of the feed was all baby could manage. They dreaded

him coming off after only a few minutes because this indicated the beginning of distress for baby.

WINDING Once he came off, mum winded him briefly by putting him over her shoulder and rubbing his back. He did a small burp, so she went back to trying to feed him, but I noted how wriggly he was and suspected that he had a lot more wind that needed to come out before he could feed again comfortably.

Mum said she thought he was hungry so kept trying to feed, but though he latched on quite hungrily, he came off again very quickly, which is another indication of wind trapped inside his stomach.

When I suggested we try to wind him more thoroughly, they both told me that the midwife at the hospital had informed them that breastfed babies didn't require winding, so they didn't need to bother too much.



Myth: breastfed babies do not need winding.
Truth: all babies get wind, regardless of how they are fed.

This explained a great deal, and indicated a likely source of the problem. I had to explain that breastfed babies can get just as much wind as bottle-fed babies, even if they have a perfect latch.

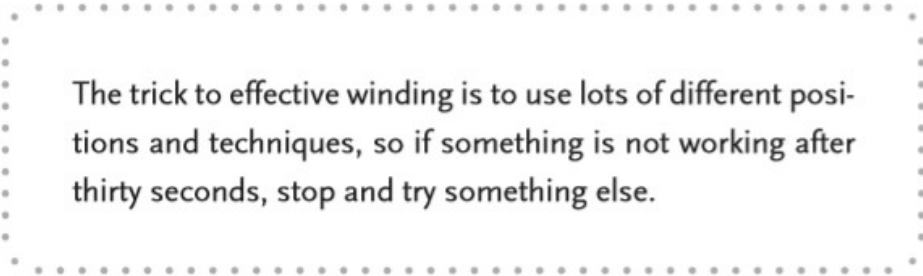
This is a common misconception which I encounter all the time – the people who perpetuate it are doing a lot of damage.

It is always better to ignore the *method* of feeding, and focus on your own individual baby and learn exactly how much wind is normal for him, regardless of how he is fed and any related expectations, as in this case.

Once I had explained this and demonstrated how much more wind I could get from the baby when I persisted, they both became upset at the fact that they had, unknowingly, left their baby in pain for six weeks. They felt terribly guilty and very distressed.

I was able to reassure them by pointing out that this was actually a good result because it was very easily fixed and meant that baby probably didn't have colic. I promised them they would learn how to be really effective winders and that we would be able to sort the problem.

The next feed was supervised closely, and when baby came off the breast I showed them how to wind him by trying lots of different positions, using lots of slow-motion movements, lying him down and picking him up, and also how to gently 'jiggle' the baby's tummy or midriff to be able to hear when there was a bubble inside.



The trick to effective winding is to use lots of different positions and techniques, so if something is not working after thirty seconds, stop and try something else.

I kept going until no more wind could be felt or heard. Then we tried baby back at the breast, and he fed much more calmly for longer than usual. Every time he came off he was winded thoroughly, and we used nappy changes to wake him up and to dislodge any more bubbles. We repeated this until he seemed calm and well fed and then I started to talk to them about sleep, while baby rested face down over my knees for further winding.

SWADDLING I suggested swaddling him to help him sleep and to be more likely to cope with the transfer from my arms to his

moses basket, but mum said very quickly that he hated being swaddled; he didn't like his arms being restricted and always screamed.

This was surprising, because I had never come across any baby that didn't like being swaddled if it was done properly.

I suggested that it was perhaps more likely that it was the parents who didn't like the thought of their arms being restricted, and that they were projecting their own feelings onto their baby. This is a very common occurrence and happens over many different aspects from feeding, to routine, sleep, dressing, bathing and more.

The truth is that new babies are very different from adults, and are totally happy with lots of things their parents might not like the idea of.

You have to take into account, too, that they are not carbon copies of their parents, but have their own unique personalities and character traits which require handling in particular ways.

I described the swaddle as being like a big, portable hug, which means the baby feels comforted and held even when he has been put down, making it much easier to transfer baby from the parent's arms to the moses basket.

I also explained that one of the reasons he may have screamed was because they had tried to swaddle him while he still had wind in his tummy; in effect, they were trapping him in the swaddle with the tummy pain, which would be enough to make anyone cry.

I asked them to trust me, to let me try swaddling and see what happened, and that if he really hated it we could always take it off again.

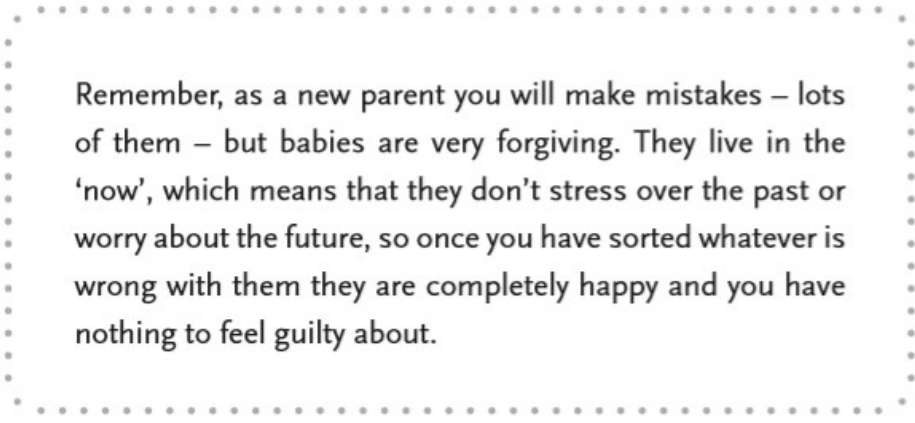
They agreed, and the sleepy baby was wrapped firmly in my preferred swaddle, the Miracle Blanket. I was very gentle and my movements smooth and baby barely stirred . . . no screaming.

He was cuddled upright for a couple of minutes in case any more wind needed to come up (swaddling can often help release more wind), then very slowly put down in his moses basket. This had been lined with a little sheepskin fleece to make it comfortable, and then a cotton cell cot blanket had been rolled lengthwise to make a long sausage shape and placed around his body from the shoulders down around his feet and back up again on the other side so he was in a cosy little nest. Then I tucked him in with another little blanket . . . and he slept!

Neither parent could believe their eyes. They stood there, rooted to the spot, just looking at their baby sleeping peacefully in his moses basket for the first time in his six weeks of life.

They had a normal, non-colicky baby who needed them to help him burp and sleep, and the worst was now over.

Mum promptly burst into tears of relief and we sat down and had tea and cake while they calmed down and started to process everything that had happened.



Remember, as a new parent you will make mistakes – lots of them – but babies are very forgiving. They live in the ‘now’, which means that they don’t stress over the past or worry about the future, so once you have sorted whatever is wrong with them they are completely happy and you have nothing to feel guilty about.

MOVING FORWARD I explained that baby was as exhausted as they were and that, if we continued to make it easy for him to burp and sleep, he would probably sleep for the next couple of

days while he caught up. I suggested they do the same, and leave the winding and settling to me so that I could get to know him and what sort of winding techniques would work best for him. This would mean I would be in a much better position to pass all this information on to the parents, and it would give them the break they so desperately needed, and this is what we did.

Mum still fed baby, but I supervised and winded and settled him to sleep and dealt with him if he woke up, which he rarely did.

I explained that this sleepy few days were mimicking the normal sleepy first two weeks of baby's life, giving everyone a chance to adapt and settle in, and that once he was recovered he would be absolutely fine: no lasting damage or emotional trauma or damage to bonding. Then we would have the fun of finding out who he really was, as he would be relaxed enough for his own personality to show through.

For the first two weeks of life a baby is still exhausted from the birth, so they often sleep a great deal, leading parents to believe they have an angel baby or to worry in case something is wrong. This is totally normal, so just enjoy it and use the relative calm to rest after the birth. After two weeks, baby starts waking up more, showing their true temperament and needing more active management, so be prepared for the change.

I was booked for two weeks, and by working with the parents and following the investigative process, we had 'solved the crime' in six hours.

They were eager students, and very quickly learnt how to reproduce my winding techniques and results. They learnt how to look honestly at their lives and personalities and devise the best routine that suited them and their baby, rather than trying to use something they had read in a book or an idealised version of perfect parenting that was unattainable and impractical.

I also showed them how to work flexibility into this routine, and how to adjust it if things went wrong and how to think clearly enough to do their own troubleshooting.

REGAINING CONFIDENCE They had lost confidence in themselves as parents, so we worked on rebuilding that, arming them with lots of hints, tips and strategies that I had discovered over the years that would make life easier for both parents and baby.

We worked through everything that had been too much for them previously, going out for walks with baby in the pram, attending and hosting play dates and going to baby groups. They went shopping and to the doctor's, and out for dinner as a couple and had friends round for supper. Basically we defined what would be a 'normal' life for this particular family and then integrated their baby into that life.

Once things were a lot calmer, they had the chance to discover just who their baby was, what character traits he displayed and how that might affect their baby care provision, and they learnt how to play with him and have fun. The loveliest moment was on the fifth day when he smiled at them for the first time.

Once baby was properly winded, he settled down to being a normal, healthy, happy little boy, and turned out to have a very sunny nature, always ready with a smile – so different from how he had been before.

I stayed in touch with the family for a while in case they needed

more help, but they didn't. They had a rough start, but from it they learnt to be confident, practical and effective parents.

SUMMARY Many of the difficult situations new parents find themselves in have a common cause: they are the result of a minor problem going undetected long enough to develop into a major one.

My aim in sharing this investigative approach is to teach you how to recognise the minor problems early on, and to deal with them before they can escalate and cause serious disruption to your family life.

In the next chapter we will discuss the different factors that can affect your baby and relate them back to this case study using my **Assess, Investigate, Modify** approach. I will give you a strategic framework of questions to ask yourselves that will allow you to prevent or solve any parenting challenges you may encounter.

How you do this for yourselves

The starting point for any effective problem-solving strategy is objectivity. That is, how to look at a situation and see what is really happening, as opposed to what you assume or think or believe is happening, because your perception is being affected by many different factors.

During the pregnancy, parents spend a lot of time wondering what life as a parent will be like, and build dreams and visions of family life, which is natural and wonderful.

The un-wonderful part can come when baby arrives, if the reality doesn't match your dreams.

Maybe the labour didn't go as planned, or breastfeeding was more difficult or painful than you thought, or you didn't realise how tired you would be or how anxious or worried you would find yourself.

The best thing you can do to avoid shock, disappointment, guilt or regret is to go into the birth with an open mind. Make plans, yes. Have preferences, yes, but be fully prepared for the fact that it is unlikely to go exactly as planned. Remember: all that matters in the end is that mother and baby get through it safely – everything else after that is just window dressing!

The sheer weight of responsibility for this new life can be overwhelming for some people, and either parent may be responding differently to the way you thought you would.

If things go drastically wrong, you may feel like your world and your dreams are crashing down around you, bringing related emotions such as disappointment, guilt, frustration, anger, resentment, fear and uncertainty.

These are all powerful emotions, and they colour your thinking and judgement, making it very hard to see clearly enough to identify problems and find solutions.

You will need to be able to step back, and this is why I have chosen to use the investigative analogy, because it will help you to distance yourself from the emotions that may be clouding the issue.

Becoming your own detective

Everyone has, at some time or another, watched a crime show on TV, and we all know how investigators work. They visit the crime scene, look for clues and question suspects and bystanders. They try to find out what really happened, in what order and why.

Just put yourself in the investigator's shoes. Let go of who you are at that particular moment, of what you are feeling; forget blame and guilt. It seems to be a common storyline in crime shows that one of the investigators gets too emotionally involved in what is happening, their judgement is skewed and they are unable to do their job properly. This is a situation I frequently encounter in my work.

Parents may blame themselves, or each other. They begin to think the baby is misbehaving deliberately. They think they are failing, and are bad parents. They start to feel hopeless and helpless, and confusion sets in as they lose all confidence in themselves. They second-guess every decision they make and ask advice from everyone they can think of, which only adds to the confusion.

Remember when you feel like this that you are *not* alone!
No matter what you are feeling, I promise you that there are other parents out there feeling just as lonely and confused as you are. Keep going and have faith in yourself – you are a great parent!

Have you ever found yourself having an argument with someone, knowing inside that you are being unreasonable but

somehow unable to prevent yourself; or made excuses for you or your partner's behaviour instead of confronting it; or overthought something to the point of confusion? If so, then you know how hard it is to stop these behaviour patterns and face the problem squarely. But this is exactly what you will have to learn to do when your baby arrives.

Your baby will need you to find a way to become calm and objective enough to figure out what they need in order to be able to feed and sleep and be happy and healthy.

I would like to stress again that every single person reading this is capable of figuring out what is going wrong with their baby care routine and finding a solution. All you need is to keep an open mind, be completely honest, have faith in yourselves and each other and work through the process.