UK’s infants are princes and princesses of wails

British babies top league with Canada and Italy

Feeding and parental contact could be factors

Haroon Siddique

British babies weep more than those in a number of similar countries, a study suggests. The first attempt to create a universal crying chart has found that babies in the UK, Canada and Italy cry more than those elsewhere.

The study, a meta-analysis of 20 previous studies involving almost 8,000 infants, aimed to establish the prevalence of colic - a harmless condition that can still be very distressing for parents and baby alike - in the first three months of life. The highest levels of colic, which was defined as crying more than three hours a day for at least three days a week, were found in the UK (28% of infants at one to two weeks), Canada (24.3% at three to four weeks) and Italy (20.9% at eight to nine weeks).

Lead researcher Prof Dieter Wolke, from the University of Warwick’s department of psychology, said: “Babies are already very different in how much they cry in the first weeks of life - these are large but normal variations.

“We may learn more from looking at cultures where there is less crying and whether this may be due to parenting or other factors relating to pregnancy experiences or genetics.”

The paper speculates that reasons for differences between countries could range from levels of social inequality through to care-giving styles, maternal soothing techniques and patterns of feeding.

Bottle or mixed feeding was associated with reduced duration of colic from three to four weeks of age on. Research published last month found almost three-quarters of women in England start breastfeeding after giving birth but less than half are still doing so two months later.

The lowest colic rates were reported in Denmark (5.2% at three to four weeks) and Germany (6.2% at three to four weeks). A previous study found parenting methods differed between Copenhagen and London, with parents in the Danish capital having more contact with their infants compared with their London counterparts, both when their offspring are crying and when awake and settled.

There was hope for parents of newborns struggling to see the light at the end of the tunnel. All studies examined by the University of Warwick researchers showed a crying duration that was higher across the first six weeks of life and then reduced significantly in the next six weeks.

They found babies cry for around two hours a day in the first two weeks, and it gradually peaks at about two hours 15 minutes a day at six weeks, reducing gradually to an average of one hour 10 minutes by the 12-week mark.

However, some infants were found to cry as little as 30 minutes, and others for more than five hours, in a day.

Wolke said: “The new chart of normal crying amounts of babies in different industrialised countries will help health professionals to measure when an increase in a baby’s crying within the normal expected range in the first three months or shows excessive crying which may require further evaluation and extra support for the parents.”

The study also included the Australia, the Netherlands and the US.