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Helping Your Baby Learn to Sleep

The most celebrated infant milestone - for bleary-eyed parents at least - is the first time their little bundle sleeps through the night. Since every baby is an individual, this joyous occasion can occur as soon as the first weeks home - and as late as the second or third birthday. The key to unlocking *your* baby's healthy sleep habits is in establishing consistent daily and bedtime routines.

Babies who live in predictable, consistent homes learn the pattern of life. They learn a routine. Babies who wake up every day at about the same time, and have meals, naps and playtime at roughly the same time, learn to feel comfortable and secure. The result is fewer sleep problems. On the other hand, babies who live in chaotic homes and don't know what to expect or when to expect it, can have problems settling at night and may wake up in the middle of the night well into their third year.

Help your baby learn to sleep by adopting a consistent daily routine as soon as possible. While your newborn will eat every two to four hours and sleep for short bouts around the clock, by two or three months of age, she will begin to sense your family's rhythm. Good sleep habits will naturally follow.

At bedtime, follow the same predictable routine, perhaps a final feeding, bath, lullaby, and soft music. It doesn't need to be complicated, just consistent. Then put your baby in her crib *sleepy but awake*. You may be tempted to rock your baby to sleep. Don't do it. You want her to learn to feel safe and comfortable alone in her crib and soothe herself to sleep. There still may be middle of the night feedings for some time, but later, when awakenings are due to normal sleep cycling and not hunger, your baby will simply - seemingly miraculously - soothe herself back to sleep. It sounds simple, and it is, if you can be consistent night after night.

Often problems develop when parents, out of love for their babies, unwittingly discourage them from learning how to self-soothe to sleep. For instance, during the first few months of life, it's probably okay to bring your baby into your bed at night or let her sleep in a cradle in your room. But beyond four months of age, try not to bring her into your bed to settle her to sleep. If bedtime struggles and night time waking are reinforced with a trip to mom and dad's warm and cozy bed, it will become an accepted - and expected - routine. The same holds true for midnight car rides and walks in the stroller. These measures do work, and are probably helpful for colicky babies up to four months of age, but beyond then, your baby may come to rely on these measures instead of learning to roll over, snuggle into her blanket and go to sleep on her own.

Also, if you don't want to get up at 2 A.M. with your one-year-old to feed her, begin phasing out middle-of-the-night feedings between four and six months of age. At that point, your baby doesn't need the feeding for nutrition. She's really asking you to soothe her back to sleep. Adopt a relaxing, consistent bedtime routine and she will learn to forego this feeding and soothe herself back to sleep. Finally, temporary sleep problems are bound to occur if your baby becomes sick, during teething and toilet training, or with the birth of a sibling. If good sleep habits are developed in the first place, and you stick to daily and bedtime routines as much as possible during difficult times, the good sleep habits your child learned will eventually return.

Managing Persistent Sleep Challenges

In the event that sleep problems are well-established in your home - you've initiated consistent daily and bedtime routines, but bedtimes and night waking are still a challenge - here is a technique to try.

Progressive Delay Responding: This technique was developed by Dr. Richard Ferber. It is a much better and faster method than traditional "crying it out."

If your baby has difficulty settling at bedtime, or can't settle back to sleep after waking up in the middle of the night, don't rush in immediately - wait five minutes. Then go in and check that your baby isn't sick, hurt, or in need of a diaper change. Let him know you're there, but don't soothe him by picking him up or giving a bottle. Then leave the room. If he continues to cry, go in ten minutes later, then fifteen minutes later, etc. Eventually your baby will soothe himself to sleep.

This method is easier on parents than traditional "crying it out." And since you consistently reassure him that everything is okay, your baby won't feel abandoned. This is definitely something to try if your child's sleep problems persist beyond six months of age.

Four Tips for Avoiding Sleep Problems

1. Follow a regular, predictable daily routine. This is the single most important measure you can take.
2. Wait until your baby is tired to put him down for bed. You've probably seen the signs: eye rubbing, irritability, yawning. You can't force your baby to sleep. On the other hand, don't wait until your baby is over tired and unable to relax.
3. Follow a regular, predictable bedtime routine. After a bath, rocking, stories and a little snuggling, put your baby down *sleepy but awake*. While it's tempting, don't rock your baby to sleep at bedtime. Otherwise, he'll again need your services when he wakes in the middle of the night.
4. Develop good sleep associations. Give your baby a favorite blanket or other comfort item. If your baby's sleep associations are portable, your baby will be able to soothe himself to sleep anywhere - with and without you.

Suggested Readings:

Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems by Richard Ferber, MD, Simon and Schuster, New York.
Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child by Marc Weissbluth, MD, Fawcett Columbine, New York.
Nighttime Parenting by William Sears, MD, New American Library, New York.