

PREVENTING SLEEP PROBLEMS

By Barton D. Schmitt, M.D.

THE PROBLEM

Parents want their children to go to bed without resistance and sleep through the night. Parents look forward to a time when they can again have seven or eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. Newborns, however, have a limit on how many hours they can sleep, usually four or five. By 2 months of age, some 50% of infants can sleep through

the night. By 4 months, most infants have acquired this capacity. It may not develop, however, unless you have a plan. Consider the following guidelines if you want to teach your baby that nighttime is a special time for sleeping, that his crib is where he stays at night, and that he can put himself back to sleep. It is far easier to prevent sleep problems before 6 months of age than it is to treat them later.

Newborns

- *Place your baby in the crib when he is drowsy but awake.* This is very important; without it the other preventive measures will fail. Your baby's last waking memory should be of the crib, not of you or of being fed. He must learn to put himself to sleep without you. Don't expect him to go to sleep as soon as you put him down. It often takes 20 minutes of restlessness for a baby to fall asleep. If he is crying, rock him and cuddle him, but when he settles down try to put him in the crib before he falls asleep. Handle naps the same way. This is when your child learns to put himself back to sleep after normal awakenings. Don't help him when he doesn't need any help.
- *Hold your baby for all fussy crying during the first three months.* All new babies cry some during the day and night. If your baby cries excessively, the cause is probably colic. Always respond to a crying baby. Gentle motion and cuddling seem to help the most. Babies can't be spoiled during the first three or four months of life. Even colicky babies have a few times each day when they are drowsy and not crying, however. On these occasions, place the baby in the crib and let him learn to comfort himself and put himself to sleep.
- *Carry your baby for at least three hours a day when he isn't crying.* This practice helps reduce fussy crying.
- *Do not let your baby sleep for more than three consecutive hours during the day.* Attempt to awaken him gently and entertain him. In this way, the time when your infant sleeps the longest will occur during the night. Note: Many newborns can sleep five consecutive hours and can be taught to take this longer period of sleep at night.
- *Do not feed a bottle-fed baby if he cries less than two and a half hours after the last feeding (two hours for breast-fed babies).* Crying is the only form of communication newborns have. Crying does not always mean your baby is hungry. He may be tired, bored, lonely, or too hot. Hold your baby at these times or put him to bed. Don't let feeding become a pacifier. Babies who feed too often during the day become hungry at frequent intervals during the night.
- *Make middle-of-the-night feedings brief and boring.* You want your baby to think of nighttime as a special time for sleeping. When he awakens at night for feedings, don't turn on the lights, talk to him, or rock him. Feed him quickly and quietly. Provide extra rocking and play time during the day. This approach leads to longer periods of sleep at night.
- *Don't awaken your baby to change diapers during the night except when they are soiled or you are treating a bad diaper rash.* If you must change your child, use as little light as possible (a flashlight, for example), do it quietly, and don't provide him with any entertainment.
- *Don't let your baby sleep in your bed.* Once he is used to sleeping with you, moving him to his own bed is extremely difficult. While it's not harmful for your child to sleep with you, you probably won't get a restful night's sleep. So why not teach him to prefer his own bed? For the first two or three months, you can keep your baby in a crib next to your bed if you wish.
- *Choose a late bedtime (10 p.m. or 11 p.m.) and give the last feeding then.* Try to keep your baby awake for the two hours before bedtime. Going to bed at the same time every night helps him develop good sleeping habits.

2-month-old babies

- *Move your baby's crib to a separate room.* By 3 months of age, your baby should be sleeping in a separate room. This helps parents who are light sleepers to speak better. Also, your baby may forget that her parents are available if she can't see them when she awakens. If separate rooms are impractical, at least put up a screen or cover the crib railing with a blanket so that your baby can't see your bed.
- *Try to delay middle-of-the-night feedings.* By this age your baby should be down to just one feeding during the night. Before preparing a bottle, try holding your baby briefly to see if that will be enough to satisfy her. If you must feed her, give one or two ounces less of formula than you would during the day. If you are breast-feeding, nurse for less time at night. As your baby gets close to 4 months of age, try nursing on just one side at night. Never awaken her for a nighttime feeding except at your bedtime.

4-month-old babies

- *Try to discontinue the 2 a.m. feeding before it becomes a habit.* By 4 months of age, a bottle-fed baby does not need to be fed more than four times a day. Breast-fed babies do not need more than five nursing sessions a day. If you don't eliminate the night feeding at this time, it will become more difficult to stop as your child gets older. Remember to give the last feeding at 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. If your child cries during the night, comfort him with a back rub and some soothing words instead of with a feeding. Note: Some breast-fed babies who are not gaining well may need to be supplemented with formula or cereal several times during the day to help them go without nighttime nursing.
- *Don't allow your baby to hold his bottle or take it to bed with him.* Babies should think that the bottle belongs to the parents. A bottle in bed leads to middle-of-the-night crying because the baby inevitably reaches for the bottle and finds it empty or missing because it has fallen to the floor.
- *Make middle-of-the-night contacts brief and boring.* Comfort your child as little as possible between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. All children have four or five partial awakenings each night. They need to learn how to go back to sleep on their own. If your baby cries for more than five minutes, visit him but don't turn on the light, play with him, or take him out of his crib. Comfort him with a few soothing words and stay for less than one minute. This brief contact usually isn't enough to encourage your baby to keep waking you up every night. If your child is standing in the crib, don't try to make him lie down. He can do this by himself. If the crying continues, you can check your baby every 15 to 20 minutes, but do not take him out of the crib or stay in the room until he goes to sleep. (Exception: When you believe he is sick or afraid.)

6-month-old babies

- *Provide a friendly soft toy for your child to hold in her crib.* At the age of 6 months, children start to be anxious about separation from their parents. A stuffed animal, doll, or blanket can be a security object that comforts your child when she wakes up during the night.
- *Leave the door of your child's room open.* Children can become frightened when they are in a closed space and are not sure that their parents are still nearby.
- *During the day, respond to separation fears by holding and reassuring your child.* This contact lessens nighttime fears and is especially important for mothers who work outside the home.
- *Provide prompt reassurance for middle-of-the-night fears.* For mild nighttime fears, check on your child promptly and reassure her, but keep the interaction as brief as possible. If your child panics when you leave or vomits with crying, stay in the room until she is either calm or asleep. Do not take her out of the crib. But provide whatever else she needs for comfort without turning on the light or talking too much. At most, sit next to the crib with your hand resting on her body. These measures will calm even a severely upset infant.

1-year-old children

- *Establish a pleasant and predictable bedtime ritual.* Bedtime rituals, which can start in the early months, become very important to a child by 1 year of age. Children need a familiar routine. Both parents can be involved at bedtime, taking turns reading or making up stories. Both parents should kiss and hug the child "goodnight". Be sure that your child's security objects are nearby. Finish the bedtime ritual before your child falls asleep.
- *Once your child has been put to bed, make sure he stays there.* Some older infants have temper tantrums at bedtime. They may protest or even refuse to lie down. Ignore these protests as well as any ongoing questions or demands your child makes and leave the room. Enforce the rule that your child must not leave the bedroom. If he comes out, return him quickly to the bedroom and avoid any conversation. If you respond to his protests in this way every time, he will learn not to try to prolong bedtime.
- *If your child has nightmares or bedtime fears, reassure him.* Never ignore your child's fears or punish him for expressing them. Everyone has four or five dreams a night. Some of these are bad dreams. If nightmares become frequent, try to determine what might be causing them, such as something your child might have seen on television.
- *Don't worry about the amount of sleep your child is getting.* Different people need different amounts of sleep at different ages. The best way you can know that your child is getting enough sleep is that he is not tired during the day. Naps are important to your children, but keep them less than two hours long. Children usually stop taking morning naps between 18 months and 2 years of age and give up afternoon naps between 3 and 6 years of age.