



## ISSUE # 18

### Article 6 : Sleep - Part 1

At first, the disruption of your usual sleep pattern by the arrival of a baby may be the hardest part of being a new parent.

This is even more true if you also have a toddler who still wakes up at night, or gets up very early in the morning. However, in time you do get more used to waking at night and effective ways of maximising sleep can be found.

How babies 'should' sleep is currently a controversial subject in our society and you will probably come across conflicting expert advice, which may be very confusing for you and your baby.

Sleep is the way we rest. It need not become a 'sleep struggle' with your baby, in which her instinctual sleep patterns conflict with your expectations or expert advice.

Babies sleep patterns change as they develop. While infant sleep follows a general trend, there are variations within this, which depend on each baby's individual physiology and temperament.

Some babies are naturally more wakeful than others, right from the start. Many babies with normal but frequent waking patterns at night, become labelled these days as having a sleep problem, or being 'difficult' at night.

Some parents have unrealistic expectations of their baby and may struggle for months, trying to get their baby into a sleep pattern that doesn't suit her physiology.

It's important not to attach labels of 'good' or 'bad' to your baby's natural sleep patterns and to find a way of parenting your baby at night, which takes them into account and also works for you.

There are several options for achieving nighttime harmony which you can consider. Both parents need to be comfortable with the family sleeping arrangements and open to making changes if your initial plan doesn't work.

Spend some time listening to each other and sharing your feelings, doubts and views on the subject. If you have different ideas, try to reach agreement about which approach you feel most comfortable with, and be ready to keep talking and to review your decision together, as your baby's individual rhythms and patterns for sleeping emerge and change.

There are two main approaches when it comes to baby sleeping. On the one hand, the attachment parenting approach is designed to work along with a baby's biological patterns, developmental and emotional needs at night, as much as in the day.

This involves staying close to your baby at night and is called 'co-sleeping'. It is based on evolutionary and historical precedent, where babies world wide have slept close to their mother, shared her physical environment and body heat, breastfeeding spontaneously through the night.

When this works well, miraculously the mother's sleep rhythms attune to the baby's, making night feeds much less tiring.

Recent baby care trends are more 'adult centred', designed to train babies to accommodate their sleep patterns to fit the demands of adult life.

These days many people have a time pressured, fast moving, career-oriented lifestyle which requires uninterrupted sleep at night. They may therefore be attracted to a 'sleep training' method, which promises that their baby can be taught solitary sleeping from an early age. It can be said that our society is currently obsessed with getting babies to 'sleep through the night' as soon as possible.

Generally, this goes against baby physiology. Sleep training may be convenient for the adults concerned, but there are some strong objections you may wish to consider, before you go down that route.

There are also usually attachment parenting solutions for busy parents, which can minimise the impact of temporary separation from your child.

One very important reason babies wake up at night is to feed. Babies are used to being fed continuously around the clock in the womb.

Learning to feed only in the daytime is a slow process which happens when a baby is physiologically ready, just like learning to sit up and crawl

Breast milk is digested quickly and babies need to feed periodically during the night as well as the day for at least several months. Their stomachs are too small to hold a supply to last the night.

For some babies this may continue for a year or more. Prolactin, the milk producing hormone, is produced copiously at night when the mother is resting. Night time feeding stimulates prolactin secretion. There is a risk to the mother's milk supply, if breastfeeding at night is dropped and prolactin levels fall.

Bottle fed babies may go for about four hours between feeds, as cow's milk formula takes longer to digest than breast milk, but will still need feeding in the night when they wake up.

A baby fed less than he should be, may appear to be fine, but his development will not be optimal. There is also a tiny percentage of young babies, who, when refused feeds at night, may suffer dehydration and need special care in hospital.

I wholeheartedly recommend 'co-sleeping'. By this I primarily mean sleeping in the same room as your baby, for a minimum of 6 months and possibly for a year or more.

This can be done either by sharing a bed with your baby, sleeping with your baby within touching distance, or by placing your baby in a crib or cot in your bedroom, or a flexible combination of these options.

When your baby is 6 months old is a good time to review your sleep arrangements and see if you want to introduce any changes.

The heart of the co-sleeping approach is essentially not only about where your baby sleeps. It means accepting and respecting that your baby has needs at night, as much as she does in the day. It involves a willingness and commitment to respond to your baby at night, just as you do at any other time.

My confidence in this approach comes from my own successful co-sleeping experiences with my four children and the observations I have made over the years, of how well co-sleeping works in numerous other families.

Whatever sleep style you choose, no approach is problem free and nothing is right for everyone. It's essential to choose what works best in your family, for your baby, regardless of what other people recommend or do. Your sleep time is intimate, private and personal and does not really concern anyone else.

When deciding on your sleeping arrangements, you do need to be consistent, but not to impose such rigid rules on yourself that you can't be flexible or revise your decisions if they clearly aren't working.

You may well need to improvise if your baby is teething, is having a growth spurt, is a bit unwell and waking more often, if you are exceptionally tired, or if your regular schedule has been disrupted by an outing or a holiday.

There are no 'shoulds' and no one way to do anything as a parent. What is a problem for one family, may be a solution for another. The goal is to find the arrangements for your family, which will respect your baby's needs, maximise sleep and create nighttime harmony.

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