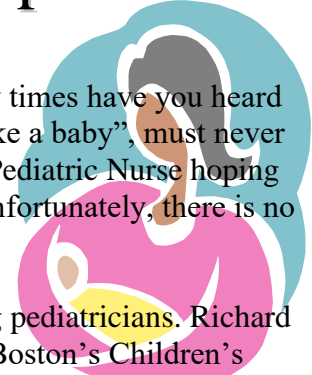


Getting Babies To Sleep

“IF I COULD ONLY GET ONE FULL NIGHT SLEEP”. How many times have you heard this from anxious new parents? Whoever coined the saying, “sleep like a baby”, must never have had one. Parents come to you, the Pediatric Nurse Practitioner/Pediatric Nurse hoping to find the magic solution to turn their child into a “good sleeper.” Unfortunately, there is no single magic answer.



There are however, two popular theories, espoused by leading pediatricians. Richard Ferber, M.D., director of the Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Boston’s Children’s Hospital, is widely recognized as the nation’s leading authority on children’s sleep problems. Dr. Ferber believes that bad sleep habits are learned and therefore can be unlearned, His book, *Solve Your Child’s Sleep Problems*, is well known among bleary-eyed parents. In his book, Dr. Ferber outlines the “Delayed-Response” (also known as the “Cry-It-Out Method”). He also stresses the importance of developing good sleeping patterns and daily schedules to ensure that sleeping problems don’t develop in the first place. We all have our own associations with sleep; just as babies, too, come to associate certain behaviors, objects or situations with sleep. We all also enter periods of light sleep, even awaken during the night, but we usually can fall back to sleep. Dr. Ferber believes it is important that babies learn to do this too.

Like fashions though, childrearing trends tend to come and go, and in recent years many parents have turned to yet another well known pediatrician- William Sears, M.D., best-known proponent of the family bed and author of *Nighttime Parenting, How to get your baby or child to sleep*. Dr. Sears believes that *sleep sharing* helps parents stay attuned to their baby’s needs. *Nighttime Parenting* may help parents understand why babies sleep differently from adults and offers solutions to nighttime problems.

Regardless of the approach, it’s clear that there is no right or wrong solution for a baby’s sleep problem. Parents must ultimately decide what is best for their family, to ensure that parents, sibling *and* baby get a good night sleep.

Establishing Routines

There are a few basic principles that Pediatric Nurse Practitioners/Pediatric Nurses can share with new parents to help them better understand their babies’ sleep patterns. First, parents need to know the difference between babies and adults when it comes to sleep. Initially infants don’t know the difference between day and night. Babies’ stomach hold only enough to satisfy them for three to four hours, so there’s no escaping round-the-clock waking and feeding for the first few weeks. But even at this age, routines can begin to be established. Encourage new parents to keep nighttime feedings as subdued as possible, putting baby right back down after feeding and changing. If the baby naps longer than 3 to 4 hours, particularly in the late afternoon, encourage the parent to wake her up and play with her. This will train the baby to save her sleeping for nighttime.

Sleep Positioning

Due to the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that healthy infants be placed on their backs for sleep. This applies to infants throughout the first year of life, but particularly the first six months, when the incidence of SIDS is the highest.

Nighttime Awakenings

Newborn infants have irregular sleep cycles, which take about 6 months to mature. While newborns sleep an average of 16 to 17 hours per day, they may only sleep 1 to 2 hours at a time. As children get older the total number of hours they need for sleep decreases. But every child is different. It is normal for even a 6 month old to wake up briefly during the night, but these awakenings should only last a few minutes and the baby should be able to go back to sleep on her own.

Often parents think that their child is waking up when she's actually going through a phase of very light slumber. She could be squirming, startling, fussing or even crying and still be asleep. Many parents make the mistake of running to comfort the baby too soon. Some babies also need to let off energy by crying in order to settle into sleep or rouse themselves out of it.

Suggestions for Parents

1. Try to keep the baby as calm and quite as possible. When feeding or changing the baby during the night, parents should resist playing with the baby, making it harder for the baby to go back to sleep.
2. Don't let baby sleep too much during the day. If the baby sleeps for large blocks of time during the day, he'll be more likely to be awake at night.
3. Put the baby in the crib at the first sign of drowsiness. This is difficult for many new parents, but if they make a habit of holding or rocking the baby until she falls asleep, she may depend on this and not be able to settle herself and fall asleep alone.
4. Avoid putting the baby to bed with a pacifier. Pacifiers should be used to satisfy the baby's need to suck, not help a baby sleep. If the baby gets used to falling asleep with a pacifier, she will have trouble learning to get to sleep without it.
5. Begin to delay their reaction to their baby's fussing at about 4 to 6 months. Encourage parents to wait a few minutes before going to calm their baby, because she will probably settle herself in a few minutes. If she continues to cry, the parent should try to calm her without turning on the light or picking her up. If she is unable to settle herself after a few more minutes, consider what might be wrong-hunger, wet diaper, fever, etc.

While there is no magic solution, Pediatric Nurse Practitioners/Pediatric Nurses can impart two general keys to success: consistency and perseverance. First, whatever approach parents try, they need to be consistent. Both parents should agree on any sleep approach before implementing it. If they decide they are not going to rock their baby to sleep, they can't give in after 5 to 25 minutes. This will teach their child it is worthwhile to persist. Second, parents must persevere and give their plan a chance to work-at least two weeks. Many parents make the mistake of switching to plan B too soon. After three or more different plans the parents are at the end of their rope, physically and emotionally exhausted.

Sleep Facts

Newborns sleep an average of 16 to 18 hours a day, but most sleep no more than 3 to 4 hours at a time. Babies usually start sleeping through the night sometime between eight weeks and six months of age. Nearly every child has problems sleeping at some point in their development.

