

## Positive Parenting of Infants

# Baby Sleep

*Caring for a newborn baby is rewarding and exciting, but it can also be tiring and challenging. Most parents look forward to their baby sleeping through the night. For most babies this occurs between three and six months of age. When this does not happen as expected, parents are vulnerable to increasing stress and exhaustion. From early in infancy, however, there is much that parents can do to ensure that their children develop healthy, independent sleep patterns. This tip sheet also provides some suggestions on how you can cope with lack of sleep while you care for your baby.*

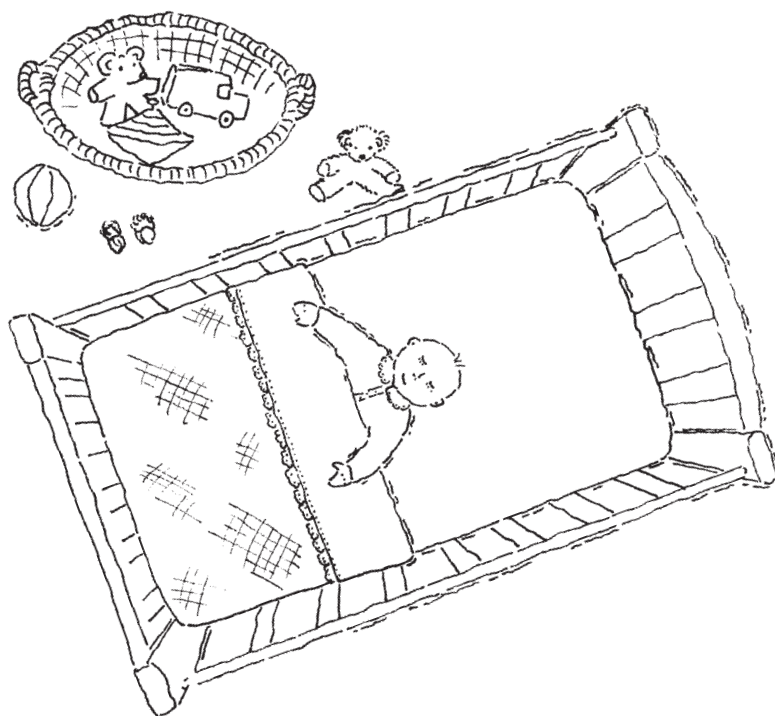
## About Baby Sleep

In the first month of life babies spend much of their time asleep. It is not uncommon for newborn babies to spend a total of 15–17 hours or more asleep in each 24 hour period. Newborn babies sleep in blocks of up to four hours at a time. Much of their awake time will be taken up with feeding. Play time is very short and young babies are soon ready to return to sleep after feeding.

Young babies also spend a lot of their awake time crying—as much as two hours or more each day. Crying is often worse in the late afternoon or early evening when long periods of crying may occur. After three months of age, there is a decrease in the evening peak and the overall amount of crying.

By around three months, babies are beginning to sleep for longer periods at night, and are staying awake longer between daytime sleeps. By five or six months, babies are likely to stay awake for three to four hours at a time with two to three sleeps during the day. They will now have most of their sleep during the night.

By six months of age, most babies are sleeping through the night. Let's look at what happens when a baby who has learned to sleep through the night goes to sleep. You might have thought that the baby goes to sleep and stays in a deep sleep all night until you wake them in the morning. In fact a normal sleep pattern involves frequent



brief awakenings that occur throughout the night. The independent sleeper has learnt to put themselves back to sleep following these brief awakenings.

## Is Your Baby Getting Enough Sleep?

It is a myth that babies sleep when they need to. Babies can get overtired and this can lead to more crying and more difficulties getting them to settle. It is up to parents to make sure that babies are getting the sleep they need. It may sound contradictory, but the more sleep your baby gets, the better they will sleep.

In his book, *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*, Dr Richard Ferber, an American paediatrician and sleep specialist, has noted the total number of hours babies generally sleep each day (see over). These are general guidelines and some babies will sleep more while others will sleep less than expected. Some babies will sleep more because they are easier to settle, fit more quickly into a daily routine and sleep for longer periods. Others sleep less because they are more difficult to settle and more irregular in their sleeping pattern. However, if your baby's sleep differs by more than one or two hours from these guidelines, they may not be getting the sleep they need and you may need to consider making changes to your baby's sleep pattern.

Age	Total Number of Hours	Number of Hours at Night	Number of Hours in the Day	Number of Daytime Naps
1 week	16	8	8	4
1 month	15	9	6	3
3 months	15	10	5	3
6 months	14	11	3	2
9 months	14	11	3	2
12 months	13	11	2	2
18 months	13	11	2	2
2 years	13	11	2	1
3 years	12	11	1	1
4 years	11	11	0	0

Source: Ferber, R. (1985) *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*. Penguin Books

## Helpful Hints From the Start

### ***Choose a Place for Your Baby to Sleep***

Where your baby sleeps is a decision that you have to make depending on what you are most comfortable with and what best suits your family. Some parents have their baby in a bassinet or cot near their bed for the first three months or so. This means they can hear their baby waking and get to them quickly to feed. Some parents prefer not to have their baby in their room because they find their own sleep is disturbed by the sounds of their sleeping baby.

Studies show that both parents and infants tend to sleep better when they sleep in separate beds. Co-sleeping, however, is a choice made by some families. If you choose to bring your baby into your own bed, there are safeguards to consider. Make sure your mattress is firm and your baby will not get too hot. It is also important to be aware of the risks of rolling onto a baby or trapping a baby under pillows or near a wall. The danger of accidental suffocation is increased on water beds and if parents use drugs or alcohol. Bed sharing is not advised for parents who smoke as the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is increased.

Finally, be aware that when you are ready to move your child into their own bed, they may not be ready to leave. A child who has shared their parent's bed may strongly resist your attempts to move them to their own bed, and it can be difficult to help them learn to sleep independently. See the Parent Tip Sheet *Bedtime* in this series for information on managing sleep problems such as this.

### ***Make Your Baby Safe and Comfortable***

Make sure your baby's mattress is firm, clean and fits tightly into the bottom of the cot. Never use electric blankets, quilts, doonas, pillows, cot bumpers or have lots of soft toys in your baby's cot—these practices are not safe and increase the risk of SIDS. Place your baby on their back to sleep, with their feet near the bottom of the cot, so that they cannot wriggle down under the covers. Tuck your baby's bedclothes in securely as this also helps to ensure that your baby's head remains uncovered during sleep. Your baby's room should be well ventilated and smoke-free. Dress your baby so they will not be too hot or too cold—a good idea is to use what you are wearing and what you have on your bed as a guide to the clothing and number of blankets to put on your baby.

### ***Make Sure Your Baby is Not Hungry***

Babies who feed well tend to sleep better. A trap to be avoided is snacking through the day and night. Babies who snack tend to sleep for shorter periods because they soon get hungry again and wake up to be fed. You will be advised by your Maternal & Child Health Nurse to feed your baby when your baby seems hungry. In practical terms the newborn needs to be fed every two to four hours. Your baby may be snacking if they are feeding more frequently than every two hours. Sometimes babies who have fed well and are not hungry will accept the breast or bottle if offered simply because it is soothing. This can lead to a baby becoming dependent on feeding in order to settle into sleep. If your baby has been fed in the last two hours and seems unsettled, allow them a little time to go off to sleep by themselves or offer other forms of comfort or attention. If you are unsure whether your baby is feeding well discuss this with your nurse.

## ***Use Comforters, Avoid Dummies***

Babies who learn to settle themselves with their thumb, a favourite object or toy sleep better than babies who become dependent on their parents to settle them. The presence of a favourite toy or object may become a signal that it is time for sleep at bedtime and during the night. Babies also learn to use these objects to soothe themselves. Dummies do not work like these other comforters. Although dummies can help soothe a crying baby, they have some disadvantages. When they are used every night the baby can become dependent on the dummy to get to sleep. When the dummy becomes dislodged during the night the young baby often needs the parent to replace it before they can return to sleep. This can happen many times during the course of a night. Aim to settle the baby at night without a dummy if you can.

## **How To Help Your Baby Develop a Healthy Sleep Pattern**

Over the first three months, the aim is to develop a regular sleeping routine. All babies benefit from a predictable routine. A routine ensures babies get the sleep they need and helps them to feel secure.

### ***Work Towards a Regular Pattern***

Babies are not born with a ready made day and night schedule. In the first six weeks your aim is to set up a pattern. While your newborn baby's sleep and feed times may vary from day to day, it is helpful to do things in about the same order. For example, when your baby wakes during the day, offer a feed, change their nappy, have a short play time and then your baby will be ready to sleep again. During play time follow your baby's signals. Clenching fists, yawning, frowning, jerky movements and grizzling can all be signs that your baby is ready for another sleep.

When you put your baby into their bed, do not be concerned if they cry or grizzle. This does not mean that the baby does not want or need sleep. Babies need time to fall asleep. Attend to your baby only if they really start complaining and it is clear that they are not going to settle.

### ***Emphasise the Difference Between Night and Day***

Unlike adults who have one longer period of sleep at night, newborn babies' sleep is roughly evenly distributed over 24 hours. In fact, it is not uncommon for very little babies to be wakeful during the night and sleepy during the day.

From the first week, you can help your baby learn to distinguish night from day. During the night, keep your baby's room dark and quiet. When you attend to your baby, use a dim light, speak quietly and avoid playing—your goal is to feed or settle your baby, and then allow them to go back to sleep as quickly as possible. During the day, talk to and play with your baby when they wake.

Keeping your baby awake all day will not help them sleep better at night. Daytime sleep is important too. See the table (opposite) for a general guideline on number of sleeps and amount of sleep during the day. Allow uninterrupted daytime sleep, however, it is not a good idea to let a baby sleep for more than four hours at a time during the day because they will need to be fed.

### ***Put Your Baby to Bed Awake***

If you routinely hold, rock, or feed your baby to sleep, they will learn to associate sleep with your presence. This means that when they wake during the night, your baby will depend on you to perform the same routine to help them get back to sleep. This is a trap for parents. It means that you will have to be up to your baby each time they wake to help them get back to sleep. To be an independent sleeper, your baby needs to learn to settle into sleep without your help.

Whenever possible, put your baby to bed while they are still awake and allow them to fall asleep on their own. Try to avoid holding, rocking or feeding your baby to sleep. Put your baby in their cot, tuck them in, say goodnight and leave the room before your baby falls asleep. Remember, the goal is for your infant to learn to go to sleep in their cot without your help. If you need to check, look at your baby from the doorway, but try not to pick them up. It's okay to try to keep your baby awake if they are dropping off to sleep during their last feed. If this proves to be difficult, try to put them down earlier next time, before they fall asleep. If you are concerned that your baby is starting to rely on feeding to fall asleep, try to separate the two. You can feed your baby a little earlier so feeds are not just before day or night sleeps.

### ***Wait and Listen When Your Baby Wakes***

A newborn baby's sleep can be noisy and restless. To understand the reason for this, you need to know that there are two different types of sleep—active sleep and quiet sleep. In the active sleep state a baby's breathing is irregular, they may twitch, make sounds, grizzle, change facial expressions, open their eyes and move their eyes

under their eyelids and wake temporarily. Because the baby moves and grizzles, it is easy to mistakenly think that they are awake when they are still asleep. During quiet sleep a baby breathes regularly, lays still and is harder to wake.

Very young babies spend about half the time in active sleep, typically alternating between quiet and active sleep every 40 or 50 minutes. As babies get older they spend more and more time in quiet sleep. By adulthood, we spend only a quarter of our sleep time in active sleep.

Typically, a baby wakes briefly after a period of active sleep. They may lift their heads, cry out, grizzle or look around, then they put themselves back to sleep and start the sleep cycle all over again. Once babies are independent sleepers, this cycle of quiet sleep, active sleep and brief awakenings is repeated many times each night without any help from parents.

Rushing to comfort babies who are in active sleep or briefly awake may rouse them further rather than settle them, and may prolong night waking. If you hear your baby stirring or grizzling, listen and wait for a short time to see if they will settle themselves. Wait until they are really complaining before going into them, because going to your baby too quickly may disturb them unnecessarily and prevent them from going back to sleep.

### ***Helping Your Baby Resettle When They Wake***

In the first few months your baby may need help to resettle when they wake during the night. Remember that the goal is for babies to learn to resettle themselves. Do the least necessary to help them resettle. You could start with gentle back rubs or quiet talking. Try not to pick them up. This may actually stop your baby from going back to sleep. If your baby does not respond and you need to pick them up, aim whenever you can to put them back into their cot settled but awake. The Parent Tip Sheet *Crying* has some suggestions for soothing unsettled babies if you are looking for more ideas.

### ***Things You Can Do From Three Months Develop a Bedtime Routine***

By three months babies who sleep well have a predictable bedtime routine. Routines help children settle for bed and prepare a child for sleep. A routine involves having a number of simple activities that are completed in the same way and at the same time each night or before each daytime sleep.

A night time routine might involve quiet play, a bath, a new nappy, changing into nightclothes, a story or songs, providing a favourite rug or teddy, kisses and saying good night. Loud or active play activities that excite your baby should be avoided just prior to bedtime as this will make it more difficult for your baby to settle.

Use simple routines before each daytime sleep as well (e.g., a clean nappy, cuddle, putting the baby in their cot, pulling down the blind and leaving the room). Remember, you can use a similar routine when you go out with your baby, even though you may be putting them down in a pram or portable cot.

Once a daily routine has been developed, try to keep to it as much as possible and avoid disrupting your baby's usual sleep times unnecessarily.

### ***Phasing Out Night Feeding***

Your baby is ready to sleep through the night when they no longer need night feeds. By three to four months of age healthy babies that are gaining weight and growing normally, are eating enough during the day to satisfy their needs. Around this time many babies begin to sleep through the night without waking for a feed. Some babies may continue to accept night feeds, but do so out of habit rather than hunger.

There are two ways that you can stop night feeds. One option is to drop the night feed completely. You may encounter some protesting. Simply offer comfort but do not return to feeding. Another option is to phase out the night feed gradually. Continue to give the last feed before bedtime as normal. When your baby wakes during the night, offer a shorter feed than usual if you are breast feeding. Offer slightly less milk if bottle feeding, or try diluting the milk with cooled boiled water. Each night, make the feeds slightly shorter and stretch out the time between feeds by about half an hour (e.g., four to four and a half hours; four and a half to five hours and so on) until your child is sleeping through until morning. If your baby wakes outside of this new schedule offer attention and comfort, but avoid feeding. Where it is possible, a baby may settle more rapidly by being comforted by a caregiver who does not normally feed them.

## ***Early Mornings***

Because they tend to go to bed early, babies who are sleeping through the night commonly wake to start their day as early as 5:30 am. Treat waking earlier than this as described above. If you wish, after 5:30 am allow a short time for your baby to settle back to sleep or to play quietly by themselves before getting up. When you do go to your baby in the morning, signal the new day and wake up time with a happy, enthusiastic greeting, opening the curtains and lots of talk. Trying to keep a baby awake later at night so they wake later in the morning is not helpful. This tends to make the baby more tired and more difficult to settle at night time.

## **How to Look After Yourself**

Lack of sleep can make for tired, irritable parents who are less patient with their children during the day. It is important to care for yourself as much as possible during this demanding time. Try the following suggestions.

### ***Rest When You Can***

Take opportunities throughout the day to rest. Even short naps can make a difference to the way you feel. Have a nap while your baby sleeps. If you have older children, put them down for naps as well.

If you cannot sleep during the day, at least try to spend some time sitting with your feet up. Make the most of these breaks by relaxing yourself. Take some deep, slow breaths. Concentrate on how your body feels—identify muscles that are tense and tight and relax them one by one (for more information on relaxation see the Parent Tip Sheet *Coping with Stress*).

### ***Meet Your Own Needs Too***

It is much easier to look after your baby if your own needs are being met. Each day, try to make time to do at least one thing you enjoy doing by yourself, like going for a walk, having a relaxing bath or reading a magazine—half an hour can make a big difference. Ask your partner, a relative or a friend to look after your baby so you can have some time to yourself. Remember your partner may also need a break, so try to do the same for them. If you can't arrange a carer for the baby, make the most of opportunities when the baby is asleep, or find things that you enjoy doing that you can do with the baby, like putting your baby in a pram and walking or visiting.

## ***Be Realistic About What You Can Get Done***

Meeting your baby's needs will take a great deal of time, and you will need to take time to rest and regain your energy. So be realistic about what you can achieve in a day. You may need to ask for help when you need it or lower your expectations in relation to work, housework, community activities and cooking. Take the phone off the hook and put *Do not disturb* signs on the door when you need time alone with your baby. Discourage visitors who expect to be entertained and encourage helpers who provide practical assistance and do not outstay their welcome. Do not hesitate to turn down invitations or to say *no* to requests from others that place you under unnecessary pressure.

## **When To Seek Help**

Consider getting some advice at any time that your baby's sleeping patterns cause concern for you or your family. See the Parent Tip Sheet *Bedtime* in this series for more information on suggested programs for managing sleep problems in children older than 6 months.

Illness may occasionally be a cause of sleep problems. If your baby is not feeding, has a temperature or has been unwell, you may be up during the night until the illness passes. If you are concerned about your baby's health, see your family doctor. If your child has been ill, you may face some sleep problems when your baby gets better, as they may want the same attention they had when they were ill.

Being a parent can involve a range of feelings from joy to sadness. Seek help if you find yourself struggling with persistent feelings of sadness, helplessness or loss of interest as you may be experiencing post natal depression.

Help is available from your local Maternal and Child Health Nurse or family doctor. Ask about day stay and residential programs offered by early parenting centres.

If you are having problems or feel unable to handle things, contact the centre where you received this tip sheet. Outside of business hours, call the Maternal and Child Health After Hours Service on 132 229 (for city callers) and FREECALL 1800 134 883 (for country callers). You can also contact PARENTLINE, a parenting information and advice service on FREECALL 132 289.

## Key Steps

- Make your baby safe and comfortable.
- Place your baby on their back to sleep.
- Make sure there is a clear difference between night and day.
- Work on a regular pattern for sleeping and feeding, even if the times vary a little each day.
- At each opportunity, put your baby to bed while they are still awake.
- Avoid being present when your baby falls asleep.
- When your baby stirs or cries out in the night, wait and listen before tending to them, so they can learn to settle themselves.
- In the first few months, you may need to comfort your baby if they wake during the night—attend to them with little fuss and keep the light low.
- Develop a bedtime routine.
- From three months you can begin to phase out night feeding.
- Encourage your baby to rest or play quietly if they wake too early in the morning.
- Rest when you can and look after your own needs.

**See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your baby, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.**

## Acknowledgments

Some of the information used for this tip sheet was adapted from Dr Richard Ferber, *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems: The Complete Practical Guide for Parents*. Penguin Books. 1985. This is recommended reading for parents. Thank you to Dr Karyn France and Ms Jacki Henderson from the Canterbury Sleep Program (New Zealand); Prof Alan Hudson and Mr Steven Watts Department of Psychology and Intellectual Disability Studies; and Karen Houghton, Director of Nursing, Tweddle Child and Family Health Service for their significant contributions to this tip sheet.



Written by the Parenting and Family Support Centre (Triple P), The University of Queensland, Brisbane.

Published by the Victorian Parenting Centre 2005.  
© Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2000.

Permission is granted for this material to be printed, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes within the State of Victoria.  
Code: PPT1004