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Consistency is key when teaching babies to fall asleep independently

Lisa Day
Jan. 16, 2007

Parents don't have to be envious of their friends who have babies who sleep through the night.

Every baby, beginning at about four months of age, can also learn as long as they have been taught how to fall asleep on their own and how to fall back to sleep after they have awoken, said Nicky Cohen, a midtown Toronto clinical psychologist who is currently registering with the College of Psychologists and who specializes in pediatric sleep.

Consistency is key.

"Send baby a consistent message, which will decrease the amount of crying and keep the period of training shorter."

The first step is to create a consistent bedtime routine, which should be about five minutes in length, with the time getting longer as the child ages.

"A nice bedtime routine is very, very important," Cohen said. A routine signals to the baby that bedtime is coming. The room should be dark and there should not be a lot of noise. Babies should also be put into their crib drowsy, but awake.

Parents can then check on their baby as often as they feel comfortable, again taking cues from the baby. If the child gets upset when the parent comes in, parents should check less often, spreading the checks to five-minute intervals.

Babies must figure out how to get themselves to fall asleep.

"Babies are pretty resourceful in finding ways to self-soothe," Cohen said. Often they need to cry for a few minutes, find a comfortable position, suck on their wrists or fingers and then settle down.

If the training is consistent, by the fifth night, parents should have a baby that knows how to soothe himself and fall asleep.

Parents worried about letting their babies cry themselves to sleep should be comforted by the fact that research points to self-soothing as a good thing, Cohen said. Not only is it good for the baby to learn a skill they will always use, but research says there is also less parental conflict and less post-partum depression when babies are self-soothing.

In addition to nighttime awakenings, there is also early morning awakenings, often created by parents themselves.

Often when babies wake up early in the morning, parents will bring the baby to the parental bed. But babies don't have wrist watches, so what started as a five o'clock wake-up time often becomes earlier.

Instead, Cohen suggested parents let their babies self-soothe themselves back to sleep. But if the baby has an internal alarm clock that is going off at 4 a.m., Cohen said parents should ensure the room stays dark, otherwise babies think it's morning, and consider changing the bedtime.

If a baby is going to sleep at 6 p.m., Cohen suggests pushing the time back to 7 p.m. Parents can

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also cut back the amount of daytime sleep a baby gets. By 12 weeks, babies should be getting two-thirds of their sleep at night. Within five days, their internal clock should be reset.

Again, if parents like the early-morning rising or love the time spent together in bed in the morning, Cohen said that's OK, too.

"If that works for them, that's OK," she said. "I don't intervene if things are going well."



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