

Sleep training basics

Methods for achieving better slumber for baby (and mom).

BY HEIDI SMITH LUEDTKE

During pregnancy, you might have fantasized about cozy nighttime feedings and quiet snuggle sessions. But a few weeks postpartum, you likely confronted a difficult truth: Waking up every two hours all night long is exhausting. Moms agree that uninterrupted sleep is critical, and many have found that sleep training is the way to get it.

Getting a smart start

Although it's possible your infant will sleep through the night on her own, 25 to 50 percent of infants over 6 months of age continue to wake up at night. Difficulties falling and staying asleep can persist throughout childhood, so it helps to address them early.

Some parents begin sleep training at 3 months of age, after the so-called "fourth trimester" is over. Others wait until their own sleep deprivation requires action. Either way, "Parents can begin learning about their baby's sleep patterns from a few weeks of age," says Elizabeth Pantley, author of *The No-Cry Sleep Solution*. Study baby's sleep signals. Does she get fussy and irritable? Does she rub her eyes or stare off into space? Knowing the signs of sleep readiness allows you to intervene on cue.

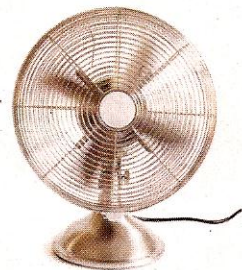
Even if you think you know her sleep routine, write down what time and how long your child sleeps, advises Pantley. This helps you to see patterns and make changes in a gradual, systematic way. Your memory for how often your infant wakes

and how long it takes to get her back to sleep may be distorted by your own fatigue.

Selecting a strategy

All sleep training is based on the premise that babies learn associations. Rocking or nursing your baby to sleep sets the expectation that you'll help her wind down. Rushing to baby's bedside when she cries teaches her that crying gets attention. Bottom line: Your little creature of habit will learn whatever pattern you establish. Sleep training techniques are designed to replace old sleep associations with new ones.

If, when and how you use sleep training will depend on your parenting style. If you value warmth and responsiveness, "It's going to be more challenging for you to try a rigid



Support healthy sleep with savvy environmental engineering

Malia Jacobson, author of the e-book *Ready, Set, Sleep: 50 Ways to Help Your Child Sleep So You Can Sleep Too*, recommends parents employ the following strategies:

- Use blackout shades to make baby's room completely dark. Darkness is one of the most important cues for sleep because it prompts melatonin production.
- Keep your child's sleeping space between 60 and 68 degrees. The body's sleep cycle is highly sensitive to temperature.
- Use a white noise generator or small fan to mask sounds that might wake your child. These can also serve as auditory sleep cues.

sleep training approach," says Melissa Burnham, PhD, associate professor of educational psychology, counseling and human development at the University of Nevada, Reno, and author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Sleep Training for your Child*. Your approach needs to feel right to you.

Do some soul-searching and see which of these strategies fit best for you and your family.

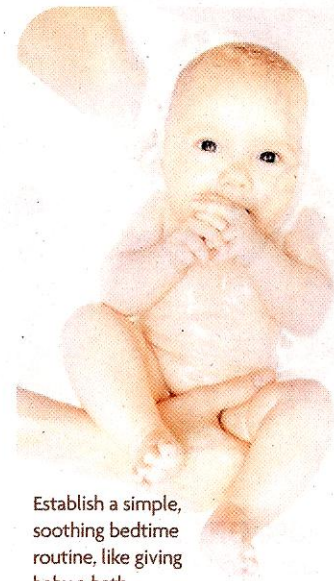
Extinction. The oldest and most demanding sleep training technique is what behavioral psychologists call "extinction." Parents who use this method establish a bedtime and wake time, and they don't go back into baby's room after lights out unless they suspect illness or injury. Studies show extinction works—eventually—but it's hard for most parents to ignore infants' cries completely. Responding to some cries and not others is thought to unintentionally reward the behavior you want to extinguish. Unless you have nerves of steel, this approach may be very stressful.

Cry it out. The most popular sleep training methods are graduated extinction strategies, including the method of Richard Ferber, MD, that's described in the book *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*. Using this approach, your initial response to baby's cries might be immediate. After that, you'll wait progressively longer before reappearing. You may wait three minutes, then five, then 10, then

15. As the interval increases, baby learns you won't magically appear to soothe her back to sleep. The structured nature of this approach cuts out guesswork and reinforces your resolve when you're tempted to do whatever it takes to get baby—and yourself—some shut-eye.

Sleep in. If the cry it out strategy seems cold and uncaring, consider sleeping in. This modified extinction strategy isn't the same as co-sleeping, because you won't be sharing a bed. You might sleep on the floor near baby's crib or across the room in a bed of your own. Over time, you'll increase your distance until baby is sleeping solo. This approach alleviates some worries because you have a crib-side seat for the show. Be forewarned: Rooming in can make it more difficult to stick to your plan. If you start shushing or singing baby back to sleep, you'll simply replace one association with another.

[tip] Don't stay up late tackling your to-do list: If you put baby to bed at 8 p.m., then work until midnight, you'll use up four hours of sleep time. "A baby is considered to be sleeping through the night when she sleeps five consecutive hours," notes Elizabeth Pantley, author of *The No-Cry Sleep Solution*. "Not the eight; 10 or 12 hours you may wish for!"



Establish a simple, soothing bedtime routine, like giving baby a bath.

Making It work

Regardless of which sleep training strategy you adopt, it's important to establish a simple, soothing bedtime routine. After dinner, give baby a bath, have a bedtime snack, and read a story or play quietly in baby's room. Experts recommend you put your baby in her crib when she's drowsy but not yet asleep, so she falls asleep on her own. Give her time to self-soothe if she doesn't doze off immediately. Your child may quiet down more quickly than you'd expect.

Respond to middle-of-the-night awakenings in a consistent way and do as little as needed. You'll never know whether your child might go back to sleep on her own if you offer milk or turn on her crib-side music-maker every time she makes a peep. Children need to learn sleep skills just like they need to learn to eat, walk and talk.

Babies' sleep patterns may be disrupted by developmental changes—such as teething and crawling—or by illness. Trust your own instincts. "Don't listen to the pesky neighbor whose 3-month-old has been sleeping through the night since 8 weeks of age," says Burnham. Every baby—and parent—is unique. **P&N**

Did you know?

A REVIEW OF 52 SLEEP TRAINING STUDIES CONDUCTED BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF SLEEP MEDICINE FOUND ALL SLEEP TRAINING METHODS ARE EFFECTIVE WHEN THEY'RE FOLLOWED CONSISTENTLY. CHOOSE AN APPROACH THAT FEELS RIGHT FOR YOU AND YOU'LL BE MORE LIKELY TO STICK WITH IT WHEN CHALLENGES ARISE.

