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Developmental Psychology

Tips for parents – from research to everyday life

#6: Helping babies to sleep

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All new parents have probably heard the advice to sleep when their baby sleeps. It is a well-intentioned advice, but unfortunately it is rarely feasible in practice. The problem is that the newborn's sleep phases are not yet adapted to the day-night rhythm. A newborn baby sleeps an average of 16 hours within 24 hours, but unfortunately not continuously. In the first three years of life, the average sleep duration then slowly but steadily decreases.¹ The duration of daytime sleep in particular decreases and babies increasingly sleep at night. We have compiled some tips from research on how parents can promote their baby's night-time sleep.

Introduce evening rituals.

It makes sense to introduce a regular bedtime routine and evening rituals from an early age. Depending on the age of the child, this can include a variety of activities that are always done together before the lights go out, e.g. singing or reading to the child, bathing, brushing teeth or simply cuddling.

Why does this help? Babies first have to get used to the day-night rhythm. Repetitive daily routines and events help them to orientate themselves. A survey of over 10,000 parents of children between the ages of 0 and 5 worldwide showed that a consistent bedtime routine has a positive effect on children's sleep behaviour across different cultures.² Children whose parents follow a regular bedtime routine from an early age of the child fall asleep more quickly, wake up less often at night and sleep longer.

Lots of light during the day, little light in the evening and at night.

A study of babies whose parents were interviewed several times between 6 and 12 weeks after birth showed that sleep generally shifts increasingly towards the night during this age period. However, babies who were exposed to a lot of light during the day, especially in the early afternoon, slept the most at night.³

Why is this the case? The hormone melatonin is important for the sleep rhythm and is inhibited when light falls on the eye. A lot of light during the day and little light in the evening and at night helps the baby to adapt to the day-night rhythm. A lot of daylight during the day is therefore beneficial; in the evening and at night, however, it is advisable to dim the light, also when feeding during the night, for example.

Have realistic expectations.

There are an incredible number of tips circulating on the subject of sleep, but there is no 'secret recipe' for babies sleeping through the night, nor are there any basic mistakes that can be made. The term 'sleeping through the night' is used when the child sleeps uninterrupted for at least 6 consecutive hours after a filling evening meal without having to be fed in between. Unfortunately, it varies greatly as to when babies reach this milestone. In the first 3–4 months after birth, most babies still need night-time feeds. By 4 months, some babies are already sleeping for 6–8 hours a night; others still only sleep for 2–3 hours at a time for some time. Even at 12 months, a good quarter of babies do not sleep for 6 hours at a time; less than half of babies at this age manage 8 hours at a time on a regular basis.⁴

Why is this the case? What people often forget when babies wake up at night: We adults also alternate between phases of deep and light sleep during the course of the night. We usually wake up briefly several times a night, often without remembering it later. The big difference to babies is that adults usually manage to fall asleep again quickly. Babies often need support to do this. Every child is different and needs more or less reassurance from their caregivers. In addition, the needs of an individual baby can also change and there may be phases in which they need their parents more at night, for example, when they have to deal with major changes such as a change to daycare. Realistic expectations are important so that parents do not put themselves and their baby under unnecessary pressure and give themselves enough time to adjust to the day-night rhythm with night-time sleep.

Find out more at:

www.kinderstudien.at/en

¹ Sadeh, A., Mindell, J. A., Luedtke, K., & Wiegand, B. (2009). Sleep and sleep ecology in the first 3 years: A web-based study. *Journal of Sleep Research*, 18(1), 60–73.

² Mindell, J. A., Li, A. M., Sadeh, A., Kwon, R., & Goh, D. Y. T. (2015). Bedtime Routines for Young Children: A Dose-Dependent Association with Sleep Outcomes. *Sleep*, 38(5), 717–722.

³ Harrison, Y. (2004). The relationship between daytime exposure to light and night-time sleep in 6–12-week-old infants. *Journal of Sleep Research*, 13(4), 345–352.

⁴ Pennestri, M.-H., Laganière, C., Bouvette-Turcot, A.-A., Pokhvisneva, I., Steiner, M., Meaney, M. J., Gaudreau, H., & on behalf of the Mavan Research Team. (2018). Uninterrupted Infant Sleep, Development, and Maternal Mood. *Pediatrics*, 142(6), e2017-4330.

