

Research and Tips on Helping Baby Sleep



Lack of sleep might be the hardest part of parenting babies and toddlers. How can you make a sleep plan when you're so tired from being up in the night? You might also get conflicting advice from relatives and friends. It's a lot to figure out! Families must decide for themselves how to manage. This research-based information will help guide you and your baby toward better sleep.

MILESTONES FOR BABIES

It's best to wait until your baby is 4-6 months old and has hit certain milestones before beginning sleep training. There are a few reasons why waiting is important. Babies don't have regular sleep patterns until they are about 4 months old.¹ By then most are awake during the day and asleep at night. At this age, baby's stomach is big enough to hold enough food to get through the night. Another reason is that your baby has had time to form a strong attachment to you. Talk to your child's primary care provider and HealthySteps Specialist before you begin. This is extra important if your child has any health concerns.

GROWN-UPS NEED SLEEP TOO

You are probably very tired. Parents who lack good sleep for weeks and months suffer. They are more likely to feel stressed, anxious or depressed.² Lack of sleep can also make it harder to cope with everyday feelings and challenges,³ such as soothing babies when they fuss.

TO CRY, OR NOT TO CRY?

It is normal for babies to cry while they settle down at bedtime. There are many ways to help them learn to self-soothe and get to sleep. Choose what works best for your family. Babies learn through routines so pick a method and stick with it.

Here are two ways to help babies learn to fall asleep on their own:

- **Graduated cry-it-out.** This approach is often called “cry-it-out.” Put baby down in their crib. Let them cry until they fall asleep. Check on them, but wait longer and longer periods of time before going back in. Start at 5 minutes. Then slowly move up to 30 minutes. Experts say you should not pick up baby or talk to them when you go in. Repeat until baby falls asleep on their own.
- **Bedtime fading.** Move baby’s bedtime later by 10-15 minutes each night. This helps them be more tired at bedtime. You will know the new “bedtime” when your baby falls asleep soon after being put down.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- Both methods helped babies fall asleep faster. (Compared to babies whose parents received information about sleep but no specific strategies.⁴)
- Mothers who used one of these methods showed less stress. (Compared to those who received sleep information but no strategies.⁵)
- Families using cry-it-out reported their babies were less likely to wake during the night.⁶
- The choice of a bedtime plan does not impact baby’s relationship with their parents.⁷ You won’t damage your relationship with your baby by using cry-it-out.

WHAT’S THE TAKEAWAY?

Get support and do what works for your family. Falling asleep is a new skill for babies. Most will cry, but short periods of crying are fine. It takes a while for them to settle down because they are just learning to fall asleep. Give it time. Try not to stress. Research shows that babies are not harmed by sleep training when they receive responsive care throughout the day.



1 Sheldon, S. H. (2014). Development of sleep in infants and children. In S. H. Sheldon, R. Ferber, M. H. Kryger, & D. Gozal (Eds.), *Principles and practice of pediatric sleep medicine* (2nd ed.), pp. 17–23. Elsevier Saunders.

2 Sheldon, S. H. (2014). Development of sleep in infants and children. In S. H. Sheldon, R. Ferber, M. H. Kryger, & D. Gozal (Eds.), *Principles and practice of pediatric sleep medicine* (2nd ed.), pp. 17–23. Elsevier Saunders. *Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 12(11), 1535–1543. doi:10.5664/jcsm.6284

3 Ibid.

4 Gradisar, M., Jackson, K., Spurrier, N. J., Gibson, J., Whitham, J., Williams, A. S., ... Kennaway, D. J. (2016). Behavioral interventions for infant sleep problems: A randomized controlled trial. *Pediatrics*, 137(6). Retrieved from https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/137/6/e20151486_offsite_link

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Price, A. M. H., Wake, M., Ukoumunne, O. C., Hiscock, H. (2012). Five-year follow-up of harms and benefits of behavioral infant sleep intervention: Randomized trial. *Pediatrics*, 130(4).