

Getting A Good Night's Sleep

Start in infancy to teach kids how to soothe themselves to sleep

IT'S EASY to spot new parents. They're the ones with the dark circles under their eyes—the “walking zombies,” as Rob Nohie, MD, Group Health pediatrics chief, affectionately calls them. Sleep is the most common topic that comes up during his visits with parents and their babies.

“By six months of age when babies don't need to eat in such frequent intervals, they are fully capable of sleeping through the night. But that doesn't mean they always do,” says Dr. Nohie.

He's an expert on this subject, and not just because he's a pediatrician. From birth until she was about 13 months old, his daughter woke up crying many times throughout the night. Feeling zombie-like himself, he knew he needed to start following his own advice.

“One of the most important skills children learn is the ability to soothe themselves to sleep,” he says. “This doesn't mean parents can't cuddle their kids before bedtime. It just means that ideally parents set their kids up to finish the job of falling asleep on their own.”

Start early with a routine. The key to helping your child go to sleep is having a nighttime routine that can start when a baby is just a few months old. This will help them relax and also signal to them that it's sleep time. A routine might include:

- A soothing bath just before bedtime.
- Jammies and teeth (or gum) brushing.
- Reading a favorite book before saying goodnight.

It's also important to establish that nighttime is not playtime, and to set firm, fair limits and enforce them consistently.

Put babies to bed when they're sleepy, but still a little bit awake. If they start to cry, wait a few minutes, instead of rushing into the room. When you do go in, don't immediately pick them up. First, try talking to soothe them.

“You might find it easier to try this technique during nap time, when you're less bleary-eyed and have more patience yourself,” says Dr. Nohle. You can try the classic Ferber method (see sidebar) on babies six months and older, Dr. Nohle says, though he admits this isn't for everyone.

Fear and imagination. Sometimes, a child who is sleeping through the night will begin waking again. In the mid-toddler and preschool years, a child's vivid imagination can lead to fears or nightmares. These fears are normal and represent a child's need to know that they are safe and loved, and that mom and dad are not going away. You can help prevent nightmares by limiting exposure to scary things (including TV shows), and talking about what's happened during the day. Sleep apnea can also occur in toddlers, where they snore and exhibit pauses in their breathing. If you are seeing this, talk to your pediatrician.

THE FERBER METHOD

This classic method of sleep training for babies—also referred to as the “cry it out” method—is a technique that works for some parents. It involves waiting longer and longer intervals before responding to a crying baby. Eventually, the baby goes to sleep, and usually within a few nights, babies learn to soothe themselves to sleep without crying.

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