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# Staying Connected

## with Tina Millican

## What Does “Sleeping Through the Night” Mean Anyway?

Setting realistic expectations for your newborn to twelve-month-old

*You are in the middle of a wonderful dream where you are lounging by the pool, the ocean is in full view, a cold beverage in hand, and perhaps Johnny Depp is your pool boy! Suddenly you shoot out of bed. In your not-yet-wakeful state you try to figure out if you are dreaming. Was that the sound of a dolphin, a seagull, a whale...? Nope! That is definitely little Luke's 2:00 a.m. wake up call telling you "I need you!"*

As parents of a newborn to twelve-month-old, do you find yourself only dreaming of an uninterrupted night of sleep? Most of you will answer with a resounding *YES!* So the first thing you will learn is you are not alone. Sleep is one of the most common challenges, worries, stress-points and, in some cases, fears of parents.

At about three to six weeks, I am often asked questions like, when will my baby sleep through the night? What is normal? I heard from my neighbor (friend, co-worker, sister-in-law) that (fill in the blank). Should I rely on this information? Will it work for my baby?

The answer is not so easy. While all of these individuals may have well-intentioned tips to offer that they have come to by trial and error, the most important information to know and really grasp is that *every baby is different*. What worked for your neighbor or good friend may not work for your baby. Babies bring their own unique temperaments, are at very different developmental stages, and the environments they live in are quite distinct. While it would make a parent's job easier if newborns and infants were to sleep through the night, most do not, and for a very good reason. Until they are developmentally and biologically able, babies, especially newborns, do not have the capacity to sleep through the night.

This article will help you understand some basic facts about sleep as well as provide realistic expectations that will put the issue of sleep into perspective and take the pressure off getting Luke to have a mature nighttime sleep when he may not be ready.

### The Science Behind Sleep

One of the most common misconceptions of parents is in trying to relate newborn sleep with their own sleep. Sleeping seven or eight hours is what parents would like for themselves, yet for both developmental and biological reasons most babies do not sleep more than five hours at a time until four to six months of age. Also, the sleep/awake cycles of babies and parents are very different.

In a 2010 study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics, it is suggested that the developmental task of sleeping through the night is attained by the combination of sustained sleep (consecutive hours of sleep) and the ability to self-soothe without parental intervention.

Developmentally we know that an infant's capacities to self-soothe and self-regulate does not begin until three to six months of age, and sometimes longer.

**Did you know** that the scientific definition of “sleeping through the night” for babies two to four months is five hours (not even close to what most adults consider a full night's sleep)? And many, but nowhere near all, babies at this age can sleep uninterrupted for a five hour stretch. To set correct expectations, child development experts confirm that it is often a full year (or even two) before a child will settle into a “mature” all-night, every night sleep cycle.

So what is mature sleep? The age at which babies settle – meaning they go to sleep easily and stay asleep - says Dr. William Sears, varies widely among babies. Some babies go to sleep easily, but don't stay asleep. Others go to sleep with difficulty but will stay asleep. Other babies neither want to go to sleep or stay asleep. From three to six months, most babies will begin to settle. They will be awake for longer stretches during the day and some may sleep five-hour stretches at night. You will also see the period of deep sleep lengthen. The vulnerable period for night-waking also decreases at this age and babies are able to enter deep sleep more quickly. When this occurs, says Dr. Sears, baby has reached what is called sleep maturity.

**Fact:** *According to research and child development experts, an important point to understand about newborn babies is that they have tiny tummies. Newborns grow very rapidly, their diet is liquid, and it digests quickly. Formula digests quickly and breast milk digests even more rapidly. While it would be nice to feed your baby, lay them down at night and not hear from them for seven or eight hours, this is not a realistic goal. Newborns need to be fed every two to four hours.*

### **What every parent should know about sleep?**

In an article titled “8 INFANT SLEEP FACTS EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW”, Dr. Sears points out that in order to better understand the how-to's of getting you and your baby to enjoy going to sleep and staying asleep, there are some important principles of sleep that every new parent needs to understand. Among the most important facts to consider are the differences between adult sleep and infant sleep.

- 1. Babies need to be parented to sleep, not just put to sleep.** Some babies can be put down while drowsy yet still awake and drift off to sleep by themselves. Others need parental help by being rocked or nursed to sleep.

Why? The reason is that while adults can usually go directly into the state of deep sleep, infants in the early months enter sleep through an initial period of light sleep. After twenty minutes or more, they gradually enter deep sleep, from which they are not so easily aroused. If you try to rush your baby to bed while she is still in the initial light sleep period, she will usually awaken. In later months, some babies can enter deep sleep more quickly, bypassing the lengthy light sleep stage. Learn to recognize your baby's sleep stages. Wait until your baby is in a deep sleep stage before transitioning her from one sleeping place to another, such as from your bed or car seat to a crib.

Sears also notes that babies have shorter sleep cycles than you do. The time of moving from deep to light sleep is a vulnerable period during which many babies will awaken if any upsetting or uncomfortable stimulus, such as hunger, occurs. If the baby does not awaken, he will drift through this light sleep period over the next ten minutes, and descend back into deep sleep. Adult sleep cycles (going from light to deep sleep, and then back to light sleep)

lasts an average of 90 minutes. Infants' sleep cycles are shorter, lasting 50 to 60 minutes, so they experience a vulnerable period for night-waking around every hour.

- 2. Some babies need help getting back to sleep.** Some "re-settlers" or "self-soothers" can go through this vulnerable period without completely awakening, and if they do wake up, they can ease themselves back into a deep sleep. Other babies need a helping hand, voice, or breast to resettle back into deep sleep. From these unique differences in sleep cycle design, we learn that one of the goals of nighttime parenting is to create a sleeping environment that helps baby go through this vulnerable period of night-waking and reenter deep sleep without waking up.

Babies don't sleep as deeply as you do. Not only do babies take longer to go to sleep and have more frequent vulnerable periods for night-waking, they have twice as much active (lighter sleep) as adults. At first glance, this hardly seems fair to parents tired from daylong baby care. Yet, if you consider the developmental principle that babies sleep the way they do -- or don't -- for a vital reason, it may be easier for you to understand your baby's nighttime needs and develop a nighttime parenting style that helps rather than harms your baby's natural sleep rhythms.

- 3. Remember that your baby's sleep habits are more a reflection of your baby's temperament than your style of nighttime parenting.** Keep in mind that other parents usually exaggerate how long their baby sleeps, as if this were a badge of good parenting. It is not your fault baby wakes up. When babies mature into these adult-like sleep patterns varies among babies. Yet, even though babies achieve this sleep maturity some time during the last half of the first year, many still wake up.

Why? Painful stimuli, such as colds and teething pain, become more frequent. Major developmental milestones, such as sitting, crawling, and walking, drive babies to "practice" their new developmental skills in their sleep.

### **How can parents help with sleep?**

Setting the right expectation is not only important for you, but also for your baby! Rushing into a sleep routine when baby is not ready can create more challenges for sleep and may not be in the best developmental interest of baby. Also, adding more stress to your day-to-day schedule is not healthy for you.

What you *can* do is help your baby learn how to self-soothe and to sleep more productively when she is napping during the day and sleeping during the night. All of this will help build a healthy foundation for your baby to sleep longer stretches when they are ready and able.

1. Child development professionals and most pediatricians recommend that a newborn (five to six weeks) should not sleep more than 2 -3 hours during the day or longer than four hours at night without a feeding. During those early months, your baby will have tremendous growth spurts that affect not only daytime, but also nighttime feedings, sometimes pushing that 2-4 hour schedule to a 1-2 hour schedule around the clock.
2. At night, learn when to pick up your baby for a feeding and when you can let her go back to sleep. Here is a tip from *The No-Cry Sleep Solution* by Elizabeth Pantley: "Babies make many sleeping sounds, from grunts to whimpers to cries, and these noises do not always signal awakening. These are sleeping noises, and your baby is not awake during these

episodes (they are often passing through different sleep cycles). Listen closely, but refrain from immediately entering the room. If she is awake and hungry, quietly feed her so she will go back to sleep easily, but if she's asleep (and older than 5-6 weeks with an established weight gain) – let her sleep!”

3. Understand the different phases of sleep and alert states for newborns and infants. These subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, cues will help you understand when it is time to play, when baby wants alone time, and when it is time to begin to prepare baby for sleep (begin the nap or sleep routine). Tired infants fall asleep easily. If you miss a signal or cue, they become overtired and are unable to sleep. Signs of tiredness may include rubbing eyes, looking away, yawning, pulling at the ear, losing patience, losing interest, and becoming fussy.
4. Establish a nap routine and a nighttime sleep routine. This may include changing clothes/diaper, bathing, reading and singing. Nap and nighttime routines should have some differences. Even though a newborn may be too young to get the signals, setting up the bedtime drill now can keep you on the right track later.
5. Consider white noise! The environment your baby was in for almost 10 months was not quiet. There was a constant myriad of sound and movement. According to experts, including Harvey Karp, T. Barry Brazelton, Tracy Hogg and Elizabeth Pantley, white noise or soft music can improve a baby's sleep in the following ways: 1) it creates a ritual or “cue” for napping or nighttime sleep, 2) the soft sounds are effective ways for soothing a baby, and 3) the gentle noise filters out sound that can startle her and awaken her from a deep sleep.
6. You can help adjust your baby's body clock toward sleeping at night by avoiding stimulation during nighttime feedings and diaper changes. Try to keep the lights low and resist the urge to play or talk with your baby. This will reinforce the message that nighttime is for sleeping. If a baby under 6 months old continues to cry, it is time to respond. Your baby may be genuinely uncomfortable - hungry, wet, cold, or even sick. However, routine nighttime awakenings for changing and feeding should be as quick and quiet as possible. Encourage the idea that nighttime is for sleeping. You have to teach this because your baby does not care what time it is as long as his or her needs are met.
7. Overly tired infants often have more trouble sleeping than those who have had an appropriate amount of sleep during the day. So, keeping your baby up in hopes that he or she will sleep better at night will not necessarily work.
8. For the first months of your baby's life, "spoiling" is definitely not a problem. In fact, studies have shown that babies who are carried around during the day have less colic and fussiness.

## **A Brief Look: Birth to six months**

The first months of a baby's life can be the hardest for the parents because you are getting up every few hours to tend to their needs, learning who your baby is, and how to best care for him. Each baby is different in terms of when he will sleep through the night, and parents differ regarding when they are comfortable with encouraging their baby to do so.

Just when parents feel that sleeping through the night seems like a far-off dream, their baby's sleep time usually begins to shift toward night. At 3 months, a baby averages about 13 hours of sleep in a 24-hour period (4-5 hours of sleep during the day broken into several naps and 8-9 hours at night, usually with an interruption or two). The goal is for babies to fall asleep independently, and to learn to soothe themselves and go back to sleep if they should wake up in the middle of the night. As noted above, this takes time and patience.

## **A Brief Look: Six to twelve months**

At 6 months, an infant may nap about 3 hours during the day and sleep about 9 to 11 hours at night (often with one interruption). At this age, you can begin to change your response to an infant who awakens and cries during the night.

Parents can give babies a little more time to settle down on their own and go back to sleep. If they don't, comfort them without picking them up (talk softly, rub their backs), then leave — unless they appear to be sick. Sick babies need to be picked up and cared for. If your baby doesn't seem sick and continues to cry, you can wait a little longer, and then repeat the short crib-side visit.

Between 6 and 12 months, separation anxiety, a normal developmental phase, comes into play. But the rules for nighttime awakenings are the same until their first birthday: try not to pick up your baby, turn on the lights, sing, talk, play, or feed your child. All of these activities do not allow your baby to learn to fall asleep on his or her own and encourage repeated awakenings.

## **In Summary**

If sleep was easy, there would not be as much information on it, or as many parents struggling to get their child to sleep through the night. The challenge for parents is being patient enough to wait until their child is ready and capable to self-soothe and to have long stretches of sleep.

Take away points:

1. You are not alone. Most parents are going through the same challenges. As Dr. John Gottman says, “We are all in the same soup.”
2. Every baby is different. What worked for your neighbor is not necessarily going to work for your child. Babies bring their own unique temperament, are at very different developmental stages, and the environments they live in are quite distinct. Take time to learn who your baby is, his or her unique schedule and ways of communicating. Then set age appropriate expectations.
3. Until they are biologically and developmentally able, babies do not have the capacity to sleep through the night.
4. A newborn (up to 5-6 weeks) should not sleep more than 2 -3 hours during the day or longer than four hours at night without a feeding. Newborn babies have tiny tummies. New babies

grow rapidly, their diet is liquid, and it digests quickly. Formula digests quickly and breast milk digests even more rapidly.

5. The scientific definition of “sleeping through the night” for a baby two to four months is five hours.
6. **GOLDEN NUGGET!** One of the most common misconceptions of parents is in trying to relate newborn sleep with their own sleep. The sleep/awake cycles of babies and parents are very different. Re-read the section from Dr. Sears above! Understanding this will make a world of difference in helping to establish a healthy foundation for sleep. *For the full article, go to <http://www.askdrsears.com/html/7/t070200.asp>*

It is not unusual to want your baby to sleep, but babies do not always sleep the way you want them to. Understanding how babies sleep may put you more at ease. Trying to get a child to sleep for periods of time when they are not ready may present more stress on you and your baby than is necessary. Keep in mind that children grow and change and their nap schedule should change with them. What’s perfect today may not be perfect next month. Be patient and enjoy the quiet time when it is presented.

If you are concerned about your baby’s sleeping habits, consult your doctor or a professional for suggestions. Remember, getting your baby to sleep through the night is not a measure of parental skills; it is simply a goal you’re working toward.

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