

Triple P - Positive Parenting Program



SLEEPLESS IN THE SUBURBS

We all know that raising a child requires effort and a great deal of responsibility. As parents, we must spend years looking after the health and emotional well-being of our child, assisting them to grow into an independent adult while working to provide them with a stable, loving environment.

Of course, all this effort starts with the sometimes daunting task of day-to-day dealings with the behaviors of a new baby. For first-time parents one of the earliest challenges they face is helping their newborn infant develop a sleep routine that will see both baby and parent capable of making it through the day and night with some resemblance to normality.

Sleep isn't as simple as closing your eyes and opening them up some eight hours later — certainly not for babies, or indeed for adults. We actually move through a recurring cycle of sleep that takes us from deep sleep, light sleep, dreaming sleep, waking and back to sleep. Brief waking after each cycle is part of a normal sleeping pattern. For babies, each cycle takes about 45 to 50 minutes, half the time of adults.

This means babies will inevitably wake through the night. Most usually they will start to rouse during light sleep, moving, moaning or stretching and will possibly open their eyes and even cry a little before they waken fully or fall asleep again. It takes time for babies to learn to sleep to an adult routine and is therefore important that we as parents patiently help them to develop a regular sleep pattern.

The first step to understand a bit about your baby's normal sleep patterns. Knowing what to expect will also help you manage the changes in your own sleep. Tired, irritable parents are no fun for baby or themselves.

In the first three months, babies have an irregular sleep pattern, with many naps, some as short as only two hours. Their

brain is very active when they sleep and they seem restless — changing facial expressions, twitching, snorting and grunting as they sleep and sometimes even crying out.

From three to six months some regularity in sleep cycles start to develop and they begin to have more periods of deep calm sleep where they lie still, breathe quietly and stir less often.

After six months, babies are likely to be awake during the day for up to four hours at a time and have longer periods of sleep. At this age about half of all children will be able to sleep for around six hours straight.

By nine months, babies have developed a fair amount of control over their sleep and with more control over other skills such as grasping, making sounds and moving, the world becomes a much more interesting place — one sometimes worthy of staying awake when feeling tired, so as not to miss out on anything.

So, new parents can expect quite an extended time with disturbed sleep. But that doesn't mean you can't do something about making sure this period isn't any longer than it has to be, or that you or your partner suffer too badly. A few helpful tips can make all the difference.

Make your baby's room comfortable

Place your baby on their back to sleep on a firm mattress with no pillow. The room should be well ventilated, smoke free, with an even temperature. Some parents choose to have their baby in a bassinet or cot beside their own bed for the first few months so they can quickly feed them when they wake. Others find this disturbs their own sleep too much.

Work toward a regular pattern

After the first two weeks your baby will start to sleep at more regular intervals. Try to get to know your baby's cues for hunger and tiredness and setup a feeding pattern such

as sleep-wake-feed-quiet play-sleep and so on. New babies need to be feed every two to six hours, but a baby's cry doesn't always mean they are hungry.

Develop bedtime routines

A ground routine will wind down children and help settle them for sleep. Avoid stimulating games just before bed or a nap. For bedtime, a warm bath, dressing in night clothes, story or songs and goodnight kisses.

Put your baby to bed awake

It is important that your baby learns to fall asleep without you comforting them. In the same way that you leave your baby before they fall a sleep, if your baby starts to fall asleep when you are feeding them, stop feeding and put them to bed. If you are concerned about your baby starting to rely on feeding to fall asleep, try to separate the two by feeding them a little earlier.

Emphasize the difference between night and day

When you hear your baby wake in the morning, don't rush in right away. If they are not distressed, let them play quietly in their bed and gradually increase the amount of time before you get up and go to them. Try to stick to a regular rising time and use a different greeting than when you put them to bed as you brighten their room and let the daylight in. During the day, avoid darkening the room and reducing noise levels in an effort to get your child to sleep.

Look after yourself

Finally, remember if you become too stressed, both you and your baby will suffer. Rest when you can and take some time to do things you enjoy, even if it is for only half an hour. Treat you and your partner to a break once in a while by asking a relative or friend to look after your baby for a short time. And remember to be realistic about what you can get done in a day. You will have considerably less time for home and social activities and must lower your expectations or bring in extra help.

Dr. Matthew Sanders is a clinical psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.

Triple P can help you with more ideas about developing your child's skills or managing behavior.