

GOOD NIGHT, SLEEP TIGHT

One of the greatest challenges that parents face is getting children to nap well and sleep consistently through the night. For most, this goal is not achieved automatically. It may take months of trial and error before the solution is found.

Just how important are healthy sleep habits? Good sleep promotes good health since most growth occurs during sleep. Also, lack of sleep may cause a short attention span which can interfere with a child's ability to learn. Dr. Marc Weissbluth, author of Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child, maintains that, "Three year old children who nap well are more adaptable. Adaptability is the single most important trait for school success. The briefer the naps, the less adaptable the child." He also cites a Canadian study which provided evidence that children with superior IQs had greater total sleep time of about 30-40 minutes per night when compared to children of average intelligence.

Several popular theories on sleep training exist and most pediatricians agree that they should not be attempted until children are at least 5-6 months old. By that time, frequent night waking can usually be eliminated if parents establish regular sleep schedules. Bedtime rituals such as bathing, reading a story, or including a stuffed animal will signal it's time for bed and should help induce sleep. However, some older infants may still resist falling asleep on their own at naptime or bedtime.

Finding the secret to promoting good sleep can be baffling for parents since even child-care experts can't agree on the best bedtime formula. Dr. Benjamin Spock recommends letting babies "cry it out" until they fall asleep which may involve letting them cry furiously. After a few nights, children usually learn to fall asleep on their own. Another popular approach is a method developed by Richard Ferber which suggests letting children cry for five minutes, then coming in for a couple of minutes to reassure them with soothing words or a pat on the back. This process is repeated, using intervals of 10 minutes, then 15 minutes, etc. until the child is finally asleep. Other experts feel that letting a baby cry it out is insensitive. Dr. William Sears believes that babies should be "parented to sleep" and argues that strict bedtime programs may fail to address the real reason behind a child's restlessness.

Parents of multiples face an even greater challenge of getting two or more children to sleep well. Authors of Mothering Twins state in their book: "...we suspect twins awaken to seek food or attention more often than singletons. Young twins often share a room, if not a crib. Their parents are quick to feed and comfort the first twin to avoid awakening the other one." This may cause some multiples to sleep lightly and wake up more often. Babies often fuss in transition between sleep cycles and parents may need to delay their response if one of their multiples begins crying. Sometimes the fussy baby will go back to sleep within a few minutes without waking up their sibling(s).

So, what's the key to preventing bedtime battles??? Unfortunately, there really is no magic formula for developing good sleep habits since each child and family situation is different. Parents need to experiment and find a plan that works for them. After all, getting enough sleep is important to the entire family's well being. Healthy sleep habits promote happy children and happy parents.

Good luck to those of you that are still struggling! Hang in there – eventually you'll find the answer.

Sources:

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5. Weissbluth, Marc, M.D. Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child New York: Balantine Books, 1987.

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