

The Wonders of Baby Sleep

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Find out more about how Patricia can support your family's sleep at the BCT online Talk scheduled for 25 March.

Although many might assume that sleeping babies are simply taking a break, a newborn's sleep is a busy time of rest, recovery, growth, brain activity, and even learning!

A sleepy transition from the womb to the outside world

Newborn babies' sleep is very different to the sleep of older babies, children, and adults. For the first 2-3 months, a baby's sleep has more in common with sleep patterns in the womb than with a those of a 6-month-old.

Sleep in these early months is usually described as being either **active** or **quiet** sleep.¹

In the womb, babies spend most of their time in active sleep during which they continue to grow, build their nervous system, move, listen, and even learn while sleeping.² There is evidence that, during active sleep, babies recognise their parent's voice and can even start to get to know their family's language!³ This is one reason why encouraging parents to talk, sing, and read to their baby in the womb, in the NICU, and at home is so important, even if their babies are asleep.

Over time, the periods spent in active sleep start to shorten and periods of quiet sleep start to lengthen.¹ By the time they reach term age, babies will spend around half of their sleep cycle in active sleep and the other half in a state of quiet sleep. A typical sleep cycle at term age usually starts with about 20 minutes of active sleep followed by 20 minutes of quiet sleep, but every baby and every sleep cycle are different.

Active and Quiet Baby Sleep

Despite appearances, babies are actually very busy building brain and body connections during active sleep. Babies' movements during sleep are believed to be a result of all this activity. When in active sleep, babies often make noises, their breathing might be irregular, their eyes might move under their closed eyelids, they might smile or frown, and they can make jerking, sucking, or small twitching movements. While in active sleep, babies seem to still have some awareness of noise and light around them and are more likely to wake or startle at sounds, bright or changing lights, being moved, or even in response to feelings in their own body.⁴

During quiet sleep, there are very few eye, body, and face movements, and breathing is more regular. Quiet sleep gives



babies an opportunity to rest, recover, heal, and supports their body functions to stay balanced and healthy. Babies move less and respond less to being moved, and are less likely to be woken by noise, light or activity around them while in quiet sleep.⁴

Both active and quiet sleep are very important for babies' wellbeing, and they are experts at getting the amount and type of sleep they need with their parents' support. Although pain, stress, excessive noise, bright lights, and health or developmental factors can disrupt babies' sleep cycles, research shows that a parent's presence beside their baby's cot can support babies to regulate their sleep cycles which helps them to better meet their sleep needs.⁴

Sleep changes and challenges

In the early months, babies often wake every two to three hours when they need a feed or comfort from their parents.⁵ Starting at 2-3 months and continuing over the course of the first year of life, babies' sleep changes from being either mostly active or quiet sleep into the more distinct periods of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) or non-REM sleep patterns of childhood and adulthood. As the process of sleep consolidation begins, babies gradually sleep less during the day and for longer, more predictable periods at night.⁷ While most children start to get all their sleep at night around three or four years old, some children continue to nap during the day up until they are six years old.^{5, 8}

While being woken frequently throughout the night can be exhausting, parents have said that knowing that frequent waking is normal for young babies, taking daytime naps themselves, and

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reassuring themselves that their baby will soon start to sleep for longer stretches at night was helpful during these first months of parenthood. Support from family and friends was also described as very important for parents' wellbeing as they adapted to their baby's sleep needs.⁶

Every baby's sleep is different

In the first two years of life, most babies spend more time asleep than awake.⁹ Most newborn babies will spend about 15 out of 24 hours asleep although this can vary hugely from baby to baby and from day to day. Some young babies can spend as much as 90% of their time asleep while others will sleep for as little as 40%.⁵ How long a baby sleeps for is influenced by many factors including their age, stage of development, health and medical factors, daytime activity and experiences - as well as their individual sleep needs. Babies, like adults, are individuals. This is one reason why it is important for parents to get to know their own babies' sleep patterns and needs rather than comparing their baby's sleep with other babies' sleep.

Settling Babies to Sleep

When trying to settle a young baby to sleep, it can be useful to think of the womb environment. The womb is a pretty noisy place, so parents might find that their young baby drifts easily off to sleep when there is a gushing sound or a regular, soft beat in the background. For instance, the sounds of dishwashers, running taps, hairdryers, vacuum cleaners have all been known to lull a baby to sleep. "Coloured" noises and womb sounds that are available to stream, on apps, and sound machines can also help

but it is important that the volume is limited to 60 decibels or below (the volume of a normal conversation) to avoid harming babies' hearing. Dimmed rather than bright lights will be more likely to help a baby fall asleep. Some babies also sleep well while swaddled or in slings, as the physical restriction mimics the womb and can be calming. The Lullaby Trust provides information on safe swaddling and sling use: www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/product-information/swaddling-slings.

For the first year, the safest place for your baby to sleep is in your room in a separate cot with a firm mattress (both meeting EU safety standards) without any loose bedding or soft toys. Many parents, however, end up sharing a bed with their babies for some or all of the night even if they haven't planned to co-sleep. It is important that every parent knows how to safely co-sleep. Safe sleep and safer co-sleeping guidelines are available from the lullaby trust: www.lullabytrust.org.uk.

The importance of supporting babies' and new parents' sleep

Understanding the individual and ever-changing nature of babies' sleep is important because it influences parents' and others' expectations around babies' sleep. Being aware that frequent waking is normal and can be very challenging in the early months can prevent parents from worrying or feeling that they are doing something wrong. The knowledge that babies start to sleep for longer and that their sleep patterns become more predictable over time can be reassuring to new parents. Parents' expertise in their own baby's sleep and the fact that every baby is different should be emphasised in a world where parents are so often told how, where, and for how long their baby should be sleeping.



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