

If you're a parent with a young child then here's a question that may make you yawn – what were you doing this morning at 1am, 3am or 5am. Were you sleeping like a baby or were you in fact cuddling and rocking your little cherub in an attempt to get them back to sleep? After all that's what being a parent is all about – isn't it?!

A lucky few will have been asleep in bed throughout the night, but a large percentage of the parenting population will have been up feeding or pacing the floor with the little bundles of joy.

Just as your newborn weaves magic through your heart, the effects of sleep deprivation can cast a spell on your body and mind. One child in three has real sleep issues before they reach school age, but these can be overcome in many cases - and it doesn't have to involve leaving your baby to cry for hours on end.

So, Why Don't Young Children Sleep?

We all sleep in cycles consisting of blocks of light and deep sleep. If you rock your baby to sleep or let them fall asleep at the breast before putting him down, you're heading for problems. Your baby passes into a phase of light sleep and is more likely to wake as they realise they're alone. They'll cry, you'll go back to them and because you don't know any other way, you'll pick them up, rock them back to sleep and put them back in their cot. And the cycle continues!

Common Sense Way

Controlled comforting was devised by Australian mother-craft nurse Rhonda Abrahams. It's kinder than controlled crying. 'A baby under 6 months should never be left to cry,' says Rhonda 'older babies shouldn't be left for more than 10 minutes crying.'

Rhonda based her technique on common sense. 'Babies need to learn to go to sleep by themselves so that if they wake in the night they're able to settle themselves back to sleep,' she explains. To work, the techniques need to be used for all types of sleep, or your baby will get mixed messages. And little ones learn by repetition. So you should adopt this routine for both daytime and nighttime sleeps.

Ready or Not?

Before starting the programme...

Ensure your baby is well. If they become ill just as you start the new routine, stop and start again when they are better.

Make sure that you're well – it won't do either of you any good to be starting a new routine while your body is under stress.

Try to keep a fairly free week to devote as much time and effort as possible to making the routine work. A busy schedule will make it harder, and it'll take longer to work.

If anyone else cares for your baby, make sure they know what's involved – nothing sabotages a new routine as fast as mixed messages.

Get a dim nightlight so that your baby can see their surroundings when they wake.

It's Just Routine

A regular routine is the surest way to get a baby or toddler to sleep independently. Little ones respond to a familiar pattern of events, and sleeping in the same environment each night gives them a sense of security and comfort. Establishing a bedtime routine will benefit not only your child, but also 'you and your partner as you can have a bit of adult quiet time'.

Encourage patterns in the life of your newborn, as these will turn into routine – and babies learn from repetition. Keep in mind that a habit can be formed in just three days!

The best way to establish a routine is to use the feed / play / sleep method. During the day when your baby wakes, feed them and then let them play for a while. Watch out for tired signs (yawning, rubbing their eyes, grizzling, hiding their face). When you notice them, you'll need to begin settling them. Have a cuddle before a daytime nap; in the evenings, give them a relaxing bath. Baby massage can also calm your baby. Never over stimulate your child before bedtime or think that the longer you keep them up, the more tired they'll become and the easier it will be to get them off to sleep. An overtired baby is harder to settle, and if you wait until they're tired to begin their last feed then they'll drop off to sleep while you're feeding them. The main challenge with this is that your baby will get a fright when they wake up in the cot by themselves and they'll wonder where you are; after all when they fell asleep they were in your arms!

Settling - Newborn – 6 Months

Unless your baby's unusually co-operative, prepare yourself for some crying – it's useful to have someone else there to support you.

1. Wrap your baby firmly, but not tightly, in a small blanket or pram sheet, covering their hands to help them feel more secure and prevent them from catching themselves in the face if they flail around.
2. Place them in their cot on their side so that they're looking away from you (avoid eye contact), and with their feet close to the end of the cot. Remember that this isn't the position that they'll sleep in – you'll turn them onto their back once they're asleep. In the meantime, they won't come to any harm, as you'll be in the room with them at all times. Look at the clock and make a note of the time. You're going to give them 15 minutes to settle.
3. They'll probably have started crying by now. Place one hand on their shoulder and gently stroke their back or pat their bottom gently with the other hand. They'll probably continue to cry.

4. If, after 15 minutes, they're still crying and showing no signs of settling, pick them up and give them a cuddle (don't rock them to sleep – remember this is what you are trying to avoid).

5. Once they've calmed down, put them back in their cot, facing the other way this time, and try another 15 minute period of settling. Put one hand on their shoulder and pat or stroke them, as before. If they start to quieten, take your hand away – the idea is for your baby to settle itself.

6. Once your baby is soundly asleep, roll them gently onto their back, loosen the wrapping and leave them.

7. If your baby is still crying, pick them up, cuddle them, and start again.

The most important thing is persistence. New routines take time, but just think how much more enjoyable parenthood will be when you are getting a good nights sleep.

Settling 6 – 12 months

Again, it will really help if you have support. With this technique your baby will never be left alone crying for more than ten minutes at a time. Are you ready? Well here goes!

1. Lie your baby in the cot on their back. Ensure that their feet are at the end of the bed and tell them "It's time to sleep now". Leave the room and wait for two minutes. You want to give your baby the chance to fall asleep by themselves. As soon as they realise that they're alone it is likely that they will start to protest. If they don't settle within 2 minutes, then go back in.

2. Roll them on their side, facing away from you. Put a hand on their shoulder and keep patting their bottom or upper thigh gently with the other hand. Do this for two minutes, repeating the words "It's time to sleep now" in a gentle and soothing voice. If the baby is still protesting after two minutes, then leave the room, and wait outside, this time for four minutes.

3. If they still haven't settled, go back in and try settling them, this time for four minutes. Next time, it'll be six minutes, then eight minutes and finally ten minutes.

4. In the unlikely event that after the ten minute session they still haven't settled then pick them out of the cot, give them a cuddle, calm them (making sure you don't rock them to sleep), and when they have settled repeat the process.

You will notice that your child's crying will reach a peak, and then it will tail off, often very quickly, until they eventually settle themselves off to sleep.

As has been indicated throughout this article, the key to success is perseverance. If you follow this routine to the letter then within 3 – 10 days your baby should be sleeping through the night, and be able to put themselves back to sleep, should they waken.

Good luck and happy sleeping!

To find out more about the It's Time to Sleep programme then visit www.smileybaby.co.uk

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