

Sleep, baby, sleep: parents' behavior has direct impact on children's slumber

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Parents who want their babies to sleep through the night would be wise to avoid co-sleeping arrangements or feeding their children evening snacks beyond early infancy. According to a Université de Montréal study published in the April issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, the way parents put their babies to bed has a direct impact on how well children sleep when they reach four to six years old.

Some 987 mothers and fathers with five-month-old tots were recruited to answer questionnaires about their children. Parents detailed their offspring's psychological characteristics, socio-demographic factors and sleep habits until they reached six years in age. They also recorded sleep habits or disturbances: bad dreams, total sleep time and delays in falling asleep.

"Few studies have investigated how parenting can affect sleep in children," explained lead researcher Valérie Simard, from the Department of Psychology at the Université de Montréal and its affiliated Sacré-Coeur Hospital, who completed her study with colleagues Toré Neilsen, Richard Tremblay, Michel Boivin and Jacques Montplaisir.

The study asked parents to report on their own behavior at their child's bedtime. For instance, whether parents lulled children to sleep, laid them down awake, or stayed with them until they slumbered. Mothers and fathers were also questioned on how they reacted to night awakenings – did they comfort children in bed, take them out of bed, give them food or bring them to the parental bed for co-sleeping"

Predictors of sleep

The researchers found that the manner 29-to-41-month-old toddlers were put to sleep influenced how they would slumber between the ages of four to six. Parenting behaviors that most affected children's sleep included:

-- Giving children food or drink after they awoke, which provoked bad dreams, sleep of less than 10 hours or delays in falling back asleep.

-- Co-sleeping with children when they awoke delayed their falling back asleep by 15 minutes.

Staying with children at the beginning of sleep, conversely, appeared protective against delays in slumber. "Giving children food or drink – effective parenting strategies for early sleep problems – can later become inappropriate," said Simard. "Since mothers come to believe that infants cry only when hungry, they might adopt an inappropriate response of giving food or drink when 29 to 41-month-old toddlers awake, which in turn causes bad dreams and shorter total sleep when children reach four to six years old."

Beyond parental behavior, Simard cautions, babies can develop poor sleep patterns on their own that affect them into preschool years and beyond. "Parents often opt for co-sleeping as a reaction, but co-sleeping is not the best option to prevent future sleep difficulties. Co-sleeping and other uncommon parental behaviors have negative consequences for future sleep."

Source: University of Montreal

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