

Gentling Your Child Into Sleep

A chapter from “A Year With the Rosies” by Diana Marshall Mei, Director, Parent-Child Program, San Francisco Waldorf School

How can I get my baby to sleep? This is a common question and concern for new parents and this question does not stop at infancy; parents of children in the grade school and high school still struggle with this problem. One parent of a sleep disturbed 4th grader came to me with dark circles under her eyes, exhausted. She had not had a solid night’s sleep in 10 years! Not only was this wreaking havoc on her health, imagine what it was doing to the health of her 10 year old!

Many children fight sleep so forcefully that by the time they fall asleep they are so exhausted that they drop immediately into deep sleep, bypassing or severely truncating the important stage of REM sleep where retention of learning from the day’s experience takes place. Our teachers are seeing these sleep deprived children unable to recall the previous day’s lesson. The once gentle process of tucking children into bed for the night has turned into a battle for many parents. Recently, while reading “The Women in the Castle” by Jessica Shattuck, a novel about the women of the German Nazi resistance, I came upon these lines: “...when the children had been elaborately and painfully put to bed (there was homework to help with, night- lights to leave on, snacks to bring upstairs), as if they were being prepared for a frightening and arduous journey rather than the luxury of sleep.” These lines capture the experience for many families. Twenty years ago babies seemed to fall asleep more quickly and easily. By 4 months, infants were generally sleeping 6 hour stretches and by 6 months a parent could expect their baby to be sleeping through the night. Times have changed. We need to return to the “luxury of sleep.”

How can we return to the “luxury of sleep?” Establishing healthy sleep patterns in infancy is essential. Once you’ve done that, you have laid a solid foundation for restoring healthy sleep when issues arise as your child grows. If you haven’t done so, don’t worry, it can still be done. My hope is that this article will help your family come to a place where everyone in the family sleeps well and soundly, and awakes refreshed and happy. And that your children fall asleep with ease.

Interruptions to Sleep

As author Joseph Chilton Pearce notes in his work “Bonding-Intelligence of the Heart,” when a parent rocks a baby, holding him close to her heart he becomes entrained to her heart’s electromagnetic field. If a parent is calm, confident and relaxed, then her baby will eventually become calm and relaxed. Unfortunately, most of us have so many things on our minds, it is difficult to find this centered place of calm from which we can then offer solace to our children.

We are often rushing from home to work to home with a myriad of stops in between, often with our children in tow. Can you remember how it was when you were a child? Was mom home with you? Was an occasional ride in the car a big adventure? Did you play outside much of the day?

Today many children spend 2-4 hours a day strapped into car seats, unable to move and explore, and are then rushed into the house, put in a high chair or bouncy seat, brought to the table for dinner and then put to bed. Older children move from school to aftercare, to music lessons or sports with barely a moment to daydream and process the days activities. What child could sleep after that? And, there’s the internet router pulsing out constantly in the home as well as the smart meter and all the neighborhood devices that are sending out signals that are available in your home. Increasingly, research indicates that these EMFs penetrate our skin, leaving us agitated and nervous.

For the young child, the skin is a tremendous sense organ. It is the gateway to all of their senses. Their experience of warmth, touch and love, comes firstly through their skin and their sense of touch. Imagine all the tiny hairs on a child’s body, vibrating rapidly to the EMFs of the devices that surround her.

Now imagine how this impacts the child’s long term sense of well being. Just as the cilia of the cochlea become inured to the constant onslaught of sounds in a factory, so too, our children become numb to the harmonious soothing of the human heart and more attuned to the EMFs of technology. I’ve had parents discover that their smart meter was outside of their child’s bedroom - adjacent to their bed or crib. Once the smart meter was removed the child began to sleep much more soundly with little or no interruption. (You can contact your energy provider and request the smart meter be removed).

Many parents put their child to sleep by driving around in a car rather than rocking and holding their child. Instead of the beat of their parent's heart and soothing rhythm of a rocking chair, the child is "soothed" by the sound of an engine and the rocking motion of the car. Astoundingly, Ford motor company has just begun marketing a device: MAX Motor Dreams - "a crib that simulates the motion, engine noise and even street lighting of those nighttime drives, right from the comfort of your own home". This device can be programmed with the use of an app. What does this say about the state of our lives and the environments of our children's most vulnerable years? Parents are so agitated and overstimulated that it is difficult to be the calm presence that their young children need. When something is not working in our parenting life, we must ask ourselves - Is there something I could be doing differently? How can I adjust in order to facilitate a positive change?

Calm Parent - Calm Child

When trying to rock a baby to that drowsy state just before sleep, we need to be calm and centered - present and loving. If our thoughts are elsewhere, if we are agitated and distracted, our children feel this. Then if the car is preferred, they are held by the plastic seat and rocked by the motion of the car, and far enough away from you as drivers that your distraction and stress is not agitating them. And for the parent, while driving, you are free

to let your mind wander, to worry and fret without your child picking up on this.

We can all understand why this might "work" for the parent and child, but is this the best solution? In order to be able to put our children to sleep, we must be relaxed and centered. We need to spend time with our children - at least 30 minutes per day of uninterrupted, undistracted time when our child feels our loving presence. We need to look at our child with the thought: I see you, I love you, I want to know who you are. In order to be available for our children in this way, we have to take care of ourselves. We must schedule time away from our children in which we can rejuvenate - take a yoga class, meditate, have a date night or take a walk in nature.

For the first few months of life, we are at the beck and call of our babies - as it should be. We pick them up when they cry, we cuddle them, we are drawn to them, spending hours watching and adoring. As a

baby grows and settles into your family, then there are times when the baby can be placed on her back, on a blanket on the floor or in a playpen where she can spend a few minutes exploring her surroundings, watching the play of light on the ceiling and walls. When she is lonely, she'll call out and you can pick her up. Eventually, she'll find her fingers and toes and be more and more capable of spending "alone" time on her blanket while you are nearby. Allowing for this time alone for your child will convey to her that you are confidant in her ability to be alone, to entertain herself and to draw on her inner resources to soothe and comfort herself. We must convey to children our confidence in their own resiliency and capacities to be independent. Putting a drowsy but still awake infant into her bed to be alone during those last few minutes of falling asleep is the start of this resiliency. If we are constantly touching and holding, then our children never develop these inner capacities and we end up with toddlers who cannot cross the room to play alone without pulling their parent along. Or consider a child who needs a parent in bed with them to be able to sleep. We end up as frustrated, over-tired parents. For how can we expect a child who has never been taught to develop and trust in her own inner well of comfort - to fall asleep without us?

We must find a way to center ourselves, be present with our children and trust in their capacities in order to convey to our children that they can sooth themselves, that they are capable of being alone. It is a gift to your child to teach them to fall asleep on their own and to be able to play on their own.

We must have the courage, strength and confidence to trust in our children's capacities and to let go, so that we can begin the long task of engendering confident independent human beings who are able to meet their destinies and serve their fellow human beings.

15 Steps To Your Households Healthy Sleep

- 1: Parents need time to rejuvenate and refresh - take care of yourself first.
- 2: With infants, nurse or bottle feed until your baby is drowsy, then lie them down for those last moments of wakefulness so that they can experience falling into sleep on their own.
- 3: Make sure your children have had outdoor time in the fresh air and in nature.
- 4: Don't turn on electric lights in the evening. Allow your house to darken as the sun goes down, and light a candle for bedtime rituals and dinner.

- 5: Use a blackout shade in your child's room.
- 6: Make your child's bed a cozy, warm, inviting space. Look around your child's bed, is it neat and clean, are the sheets and blankets tucked in and orderly? Make beds in the morning after waking - teach your older children to do this. Then, at bedtime the child will experience their bed as inviting. No one likes to sleep in a messy unkempt bed.
- 7: Warmth is very important. Is your child warm enough while trying to sleep? A cold child will awaken frequently while a warm enough child will feel drowsy and comfortable. "Sleep Sacks" work well for babies and younger children while older children enjoy a hot water bottle, covered in an old cashmere sweater that's been felted and sewn to fit. Tuck the hot water bottle into the foot of their bed to keep toes toasty or they can place it near their pillow to warm their chest.
- 8: If sleep is a struggle, designate bedrooms as "sleep only" spaces. Move toys to a corner of the kitchen or living room and declutter bedrooms. Read bedtime stories in the living room and move to the bedroom when it's time for sleep.
- 9: Slow down in the evenings. Rough and tumble play should happen well before bedtime. The last few hours of the day should be set aside for calm activities: Supper, bath, story, prayer or verse, then blow out the candle.
- 10: Rhythm Rhythm Rhythm!! Create a rhythm for your family's day. Try to have meal times at or around the same time each day. The more rhythmical your life, the easier it will be for you to get your children to sleep. If everyday you have dinner at 6, then bath at 6:30 followed by story, verse and sleep at 7 - you will eliminate many struggles. Your child will learn that this is how life is at home, and parents will have a much needed evening together.
- 11: Once you've decided on a rhythm, resolve to stick to it for bedtimes. Just as you convey to your child that you will hold hands while crossing a busy street, you need the same kind of resolve regarding bedtime. Without that resolve, your child will sense the "wiggle room" and resist your efforts.
- 12: Start early. There's an important window of time after an early dinner when a young child is ready for sleep. If your child is still awake at 8, 9 or 10, they are into their "second wind."² This is when the liver which should be storing glycogens for the next day, wakes up and is flooding your child's system, giving them lots of out-of-sync energy.

[Note: Many parents object to an early dinner and bedtime because it limits their time with their child due to later work schedules. Families deal successfully with this issue by moving family time to the morning and have a large “farmer style” breakfast with cloth napkins and a candle. Then young children can be put to sleep earlier when they need to be and parents have an evening together.]

13: If your child is fighting sleep, don’t lie down with him. It is much better to sit beside the bed holding your child’s hand. This leaves the child more free to develop their own sleep/breath rhythms and offers more independence than being cuddled up in bed with you.

14: If you’ve set a rhythm and your child is still fighting sleep, leave the room, and return after 10 minutes of crying. When you return, remind your child with a calm voice that it’s bedtime. Lie them down again in their bed and leave the room. Repeat this procedure with no drama; just stay calm. After the 3rd time - no more talking, no more eye contact, just lie your child down, give a few pats on the head or back and then leave. You may have

to repeat this for hours - persist! Sometimes you may have to repeat this procedure for several nights until your child is sleeping through the night and staying in bed. Please remember that a healthy sleep rhythm is a gift you are trying to impart on your child and yourself. Even if your child resists, you can know that establishing healthy sleep is what your child needs.

15: If an older child is still needing help with sleep, and coming into your room to wake you in the middle of the night, offer them the option of sleeping in a “nest” beside your bed rather than climbing into your bed and waking you. Prepare the “nest” with a blanket and pillow - a sleeping bag works well, too - and place it under your bed or on a nearby chair. Tell your child that if they awaken and need to be closer to you during the night, they can come in to sleep in the nest - but they may not awaken you. If they awaken you, then they must return to their room to sleep. Insist upon this. Your child may use the nest for a couple of nights, but most children will return to sleeping in their own beds after a few uncomfortable nights on the floor without the satisfaction of engaging you in their nighttime wakefulness.

² Susan Johnson MD, “The Importance of Sleep” You and Your Child’s Health, www.youandyourchildshealth.org/