

When will my baby sleep through the night?

Sleep is very important and it is one of the most common adjustments we must make when a baby is born. When babies are brand new they can sleep as much as 20 out of 24 hours in a day. Of course they usually spend their day in a three to four hour cycle of sleep, eat, and poop with a little awake and alert time thrown in. Occasionally I have had a mother tell me that her baby has slept through the night since being brought home from the hospital, but that is rarely the case. My definition of sleeping through the night is when the mother answers “Yes” to the question: “Is the baby sleeping through the night?” Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is adequate sleep. Another definition could be when the baby sleeps one minute longer than the mother does. All of what follows is my opinion based on some science, but it is what I have come to believe through experience and by listening to some experts in the field, but is mostly based on what many parents have told me.

By four months of age about half the babies will be sleeping through the night and by six months about 80% will. There are some things that could possibly be done early on to encourage sleep. Keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way to approach this. It all depends on what you want and what will work for you. After about two months, sooner in some babies, you could have the baby sleeping in a crib in his own room. Another early thing to do is to place the baby in the crib drowsy, but not asleep so that he gets used to being in the crib and falling asleep there. This is instead of holding him or nursing him until he falls asleep and then putting him down. Co-sleeping, which is beyond the scope of this handout, might prolong the night waking.

If your baby is older than six months and you would like for her to sleep through the night I have a plan that might work for you. The older the baby, the greater chance it will work.

I would split the sleep problem into three different sections: naptime, going to sleep for the night, and waking in the middle of the night. Approach them separately and in order, taking each segment two weeks at a time. First take care of the naptime. Keep doing what ever you are doing at night and in the middle of the night. For naps place the baby in the crib in another room drowsy, but awake. Then let her fuss or cry. Sometimes it will be more like wailing. Warn your neighbors if you think the crying will disturb them. You can check on her at fifteen-minute intervals for a very short time. Do this just to make sure that she is safe. Do not pick her up. Do not cuddle her. Do not sooth her. Do not even talk to her, except to say softly and briefly something like “it’s time to sleep – night – night”. If she is tangled in a blanket, has a foot through the crib rail, or has vomited from crying you can correct the problem. Do it as dispassionately as possible. You will have to be a good actor. If she goes on for an hour, then pick her up and do what ever your instincts tell you to do: hold, rock, feed, even take her to bed with you if that is what you are doing in the evening. Before the two weeks are over, she should be going to sleep for her naps with little or no fussing.

Next tackle the going to sleep for the night. Use the same approach by placing him drowsy, but awake in his crib. Checking every fifteen minutes up to an hour. Give that two weeks also. Then comes the hard part. When he awakens in the middle of the night, you need to use the same approach. It will mean that you will have to resist going in to quiet him, and might miss an hour or two of sleep. So both parents must discuss this and agree on an approach. If there is an older child and you are afraid she will be awakened by the crying baby, bring that older one in to bed with you.

Remember that your child will be the person she will be based upon inherited traits and how you raise her. During the normal course of the day showing her unconditional love, teaching her, correcting her, praising her, disciplining her, marveling at her achievements, constructive criticism when appropriate, and setting a good example will build her self esteem and personality. Who she becomes will not

be based upon how you “neglect” her when she cries as she learns to sleep.

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