

Sleeping like a baby? Help for the early days... and nights

"Waa! Waa! Waa!" As the wails start up yet again, there can't be many mums and dads who haven't, at least on some occasions, felt a sense of despair. And the feeling worsens when we remember that Lisa at playgroup says that her baby (who is the same age as ours) sleeps peacefully through the whole night.

Is it just us? Are we doing something wrong? How on earth can we start to get a good night's sleep?

Establishing a bedtime routine

In the few first weeks after the baby has been born, it's normal for our lives to be turned upside down - we can't tell night from day. But right from the start, we can do things that will gradually help our baby to recognise when it's night-time. A bath just before bed is a good routine to adopt, and, of course, it can also be a fun time, with splashing and kicking exercise. Follow this with a last drink to help soothe, comfort and calm - this is important because an excited child won't go off to sleep very easily. Having a quiet cuddle with them (and, as they get older, stories and songs) all help to get the message over that bedtime is here. A special prayer or song as you say goodnight, rounds everything off well.

Aim to keep the bedroom temperature not too hot or cold, use light-weight bedding rather than a duvet, and always put babies to sleep on their back, never on their tummy. It's best if the room is darkened with a blind or thick curtain to stop them waking up too early in the morning. Keep a nightlight, hall or landing light on so you can check on them without needing to put on a main light.

When we put our baby down for the night, we should leave the room, but not totally close their bedroom door. Most babies cry at this point, but try not to rush straight back. Wait a little while to see if they will drop off to sleep - they often do. If their crying becomes very distressed, go in and cuddle and comfort them on the spot - it's best not to take them out of the room so that they don't begin to expect to be taken out with you.

Starting as we mean to go on

It can be a really testing time when our child is big enough to sleep in a proper bed because they love the freedom and think

they can come downstairs whenever they like. But unless we want to spend the rest of their childhood taking them back to bed, we need to get them used to staying in bed once they are put there.

One dad, when his twin girls reached this stage, told them firmly they had to stay in their bedroom. To make his point, he sat outside their door reading a book for the first four or five nights. At first, of course, one or other would peek out the door to check if he was still there, close it quickly, giggle and jump back into bed. His quiet determination (not anger) meant they learnt quickly that coming out of their bedroom once they'd been put to bed wasn't going to work, and so bedtime wandering never became a problem in that family.

If our child does get up to find us, it's best for us to be united and consistent about taking them back to bed - calmly and as often as necessary. It's up to us! If we stick with it and don't falter, children accept that bedtime means staying in their room. In the middle of the night it can be so tempting to take them into our bed (after all, it's not much fun getting out into the cold), but many parents have regretted this because it can quickly become a very difficult habit for us and them to break.

Possible problems ...

1 Some babies suffer from the so-called 'three-month' colic. This usually affects them in the early evening, just when we're exhausted, and it can be one of the most stressful problems to cope with. Contact your Health Visitor or check out the Cry-sis website to get advice (www.cry-sis.org.uk). Do be reassured that this is not happening because of something you've done wrong. Colic just happens to some babies and you have to grit your teeth and wait for it to pass. We should keep going with our routine, even if our baby doesn't settle down to sleep. As their stomach grows and the colic passes, they will be able to sleep right through until the morning (and let mum and dad do so, as well!).



2 Just as we think we've got our baby into a perfect sleeping routine, their first teeth decide to make an appearance. Both their sleeping and eating can be upset, although some babies are less affected than others. Some of the possible symptoms are a runny nose, constant dribbling, red cheeks, ear rubbing, chewing anything and everything, and stronger and stronger smelling nappies. If any of these symptoms are really bad, get advice from your doctor or health visitor. As you can imagine, throbbing gums really disturb a baby's sleep.

3 Some babies and toddlers suffer from uncomfortable itching from the skin problem eczema. There are many different causes, but check out if it is due to an allergic reaction to something in their diet or from washing their clothes (including bibs) in a fabric conditioner or biological powder containing enzymes.

Babies have extra-sensory perception!

It is a well-known fact that our baby will 'know' if something special is planned. So, if we are hoping to go out for an evening, try to be unhurried and relaxed. Somehow, babies often respond by being fractious, so it can take more patience on our part to help settle them down before we do manage to get out.

A final word of comfort: babies do eventually establish their own sleeping pattern. When they are teenagers, we'll wonder how on earth we can persuade them to stop sleeping - or at least lying about in bed all day! It's just another 'phase' that they (and we) will go through.

If things are getting really desperate, contact Cry-sis who offer support for families who have excessively crying, sleepless, or demanding babies.

Help line: **08451 228 669**
Website: www.cry-sis.org.uk

Your Family Charity

Care for the Family has been supporting and encouraging families in the UK since 1988. Its family-building events have been attended by over 320,000 people and many more have been helped through special initiatives - including stepfamilies, bereaved parents and those parenting alone. Founded by best-selling author and speaker Rob Parsons, the charity is committed to strengthening family life and helping those who face family difficulties.

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