**WINNING AT SLEEP ROULETTE – 6 SCIENCE-BACKED BABY SLEEP STRATEGIES**

Everything about baby sleep can seem frighteningly high-stakes at 3 A.M. in the morning.

Make one tiny mistake in his or her training and your child’s development will be seriously affected: he’ll either end up waking in the night well into his high school years, or worse, develop anxiety, depression, or mood swings.

And with every sleep expert offering slightly different advice on the ideal timing and method for sleep training you may be unsure about who to believe, how to proceed, or which sleep training method you should follow.

That’s where this article fits in – I’m going to help you separate sleep fact from sleep fiction by zeroing in on 6 science-backed strategies that have been proven to promote healthy sleep habits in babies and young children.

**Strategy #1 – Learn to Spot Your Child’s Sleep Cues**

Like the rest of us, your child has a sleep window of opportunity, a period of time when he is tired, but not too tired.

If that window closes before you have a chance to tuck your child into bed, his body will start releasing chemicals to fight the fatigue and it will be much more difficult for you to get him to go to sleep. So how can you tell if your baby is getting sleepy? It’s not as if your one-month-old can tell you what he needs. Here are some sleep cues that your baby is ready to start winding down for a nap or for bedtime:

* Your baby is calmer and less active – this is the most obvious cue that your baby is tired and you need to act accordingly.
* Your baby may be less tuned-in to his surroundings – his eyes may be less focused and his eyelids may be drooping.
* Your baby may be quieter – if your baby tends to babble up a storm during his more social times of the day, you may notice that the chatter dwindles off as he starts to get sleepy.
* Your baby may nurse more slowly – instead of sucking away vigorously, your baby will tend to nurse more slowly as he gets sleepy. In fact, if he’s sleepy enough, he may even fall asleep mid-meal.
* Your baby may start yawning – if your baby does this, well, that’s a not-so-subtle sign that he’s one sleepy baby.

When your baby is very young, you should start his wind-down routine within one to two hours of the time when he first woke up.

If you miss his initial sleep cues and start to notice signs of overtiredness – for instance, fussiness, irritability, and eye-rubbing, simply note how long your baby was up this time around and then plan to initiate the wind-down routine about 20 minutes earlier the next time he wakes up. (The great thing about parenting a newborn is that you get lots of opportunities to practice picking up on those sleep cues—like about six or seven times a day!)

Learning to read your baby’s own unique sleep cues is the first step to a more rested and more content baby.

Here’s something else you need to know about babies’ sleep cues, something that can toss you a major curve ball if you’re caught off guard:

Babies tend to go through an extra-fussy period when they reach the six-week mark. The amount of crying that babies do in a day tends to increase noticeably when babies are around six weeks of age.

You aren’t doing anything wrong and there isn’t anything wrong with your baby. It’s just a temporary stage that babies go through.

If your child becomes overtired, your child is likely to behave in one or more of the following ways (results may vary, depending on his age and personality):

• Your child will get a sudden burst of energy at the very time when you think she should be running on empty.

• You’ll start seeing “wired” and hyperactive behavior, even if such behavior is totally out of character for your child at other times of the day.

• Your toddler or preschooler will become uncooperative or argumentative.

• Your child will be whiny or clingy or she’ll just generally fall apart because she simply can’t cope with the lack of sleep any longer.

You will probably find that your child has his or her own unique response to being overtired. Some children start to look pale. Some young babies start rooting around for a breast and will latch on to anything within rooting distance, including your face or your arm! When nothing seems to be wrong (he’s fed and clean), but he’s just whining about everything and wants to be held all day, he’s overtired and needs help to get to sleep.

Learning to read your baby’s own unique sleep cues is the first step to a more rested and happier baby.

**Strategy #2 – Teach Your Baby to Distinguish between Night and Day**

Because our circadian rhythm (our internal time clock) operates on a 24-hour and 10-minute to 24 hour and 20-minute cycle (everyone’s body clock ticks along at a slightly different rhythm) and all of our rhythms are slightly out of sync with the 24-hour clock on which the planet operates, we have to reset our internal clocks each and every day – otherwise, we’d slowly but surely stay up later and sleep in later each day until we had our cycles way out of whack.

Daylight is one of the mechanisms that regulate our biological cycles.

Being exposed to darkness at night and daylight first thing in the morning regulates the body’s production of melatonin, a hormone that keeps our bodies’ internal clock in sync to that we feel sleepy and alert at the appropriate times.

By exposing your baby to daylight shortly after he wakes up in the morning and keeping his environment brightly lit during his waking hours, you will help his circadian rhythm to cue him to feel sleepy at the right times.

Moreover, he’ll start to associate darkness with sleep time and bright light with wake-up time – you’ll find that it works best to take advantage of sunlight (as opposed to artificial light) whenever possible.

Studies have shown that exposing your baby to daylight between noon and 4:00 P.M. will increase the odds of your baby getting a good night’s sleep.

**Strategy #3 – Let Your Baby Practise Falling Asleep on His Own**

Some sleep experts recommend that you put your baby to bed in a sleepy-but-awake state whenever possible from the newborn stage onwards so that he can practice some self-soothing behaviors.

Others say that you should give your baby at least one opportunity to try to fall asleep on his own each day.

Lastly, some others say that there’s no point even bothering to work on these skills until your baby reaches that three-to-four month mark (when your baby’s sleep-wake rhythm begins to mature so that some sleep learning can begin to take place).

Sleep experts claim that the sleep-association clock starts ticking at around six weeks. They claim that this is the point at which your baby begins to really tune into his environment as he’s falling asleep.

So if he gets used to falling asleep in your arms while your rock him and sing to him, he will want you to rock him and sing to him when he wakes up in the middle of the night – that’s the only way he knows on how to fall asleep.

This is because he has developed a sleep association that involves you – you have become a walking, talking sleep aid.

Some parents decide that it makes sense to take a middle-of-the-road approach to sleep associations during the early weeks and months of their baby’s life – they decide to make getting sleep the priority for themselves and their babies and to take advantage of any opportunities to start helping their babies to develop healthy sleep habits.

Regardless of when you start paying attention to the types of sleep associations your baby may be developing, at some point you will want to consider whether your baby could be starting to associate any of the following habits or behaviors with the process of falling asleep:

* Falling asleep during bottle-feeding
* Being rocked to sleep
* Having you rub or pat his back, sing a lullaby, or otherwise play an active role in helping your baby to fall asleep
* Having you in the room until your baby falls asleep
* Relying on a pacifier

Here’s something important to keep in mind, particularly since we tend to fall into an all-or-nothing trap when we’re dealing with the subject of sleep.

You can reduce the strength of any particular sleep association by making sure it is only present some of the time when your baby is falling asleep.

If, for example, you nurse your baby to sleep some of the time, rock your baby to sleep some of the time, and try to put your baby to bed just some of the time when he’s sleep but awake, he’ll have a hard time getting hooked on any sleep association.

Sleep experts stress that the feeding-sleep association tends to be particularly powerful, so if you can encourage your baby to fall asleep without always needing to be fed to sleep, your baby will have an easier time learning how to soothe himself to sleep when he gets a little older.

Most babies are ready to start practicing these skills around the three- to the four-month mark.

**Strategy #4 – Make Daytime Sleep a Priority: Children Who Nap Sleep Better**

Scientific research has shown that babies who nap during the day sleep better and longer at nighttime. While you might think that skipping babies’ daytime naps might make it easier to get them off to bed at evening, babies typically end up being so overtired that they have a very difficult time settling down at bedtime and they don’t sleep particularly well at night.

And rather than sleeping in so that they can catch up on the sleep they didn’t get the day before, they tend to start the next day too early and they have a difficult time settling down for their naps, as well.

Simply put, it is important to make your child’s daytime sleep a priority, just as you make a point of ensuring that he receives nutritious meals and snacks on a regular basis – your child needs nutritious sleep snacks during the day in addition to his main nighttime sleep meal in order to be at his very best.

In addition, babies, toddlers, and preschoolers who nap are generally in a better mood and have an improved attention span as compared to their age-mates who don’t nap.

**Strategy #5 – Know When Your Baby No Longer Needs to Be Fed At Night**

Your baby may continue to wake up in the night out of habit even when he’s outgrown the need for a middle-of-the-night feeding.

If your baby is going without that nighttime feeding some of the time or doesn’t seem particularly interested in nursing once he gets up in the night, it might be time to eliminate that nighttime feeding and use non-food methods to soothe him back to sleep.

Eventually, of course, you’ll want to encourage him to assume responsibility for soothing himself to sleep, but the first hurdle is to work on breaking that powerful food-sleep association.

With some children, it happens quickly. With other children, it’s a much slower process.

Once you break that association, he may stop waking as often in the night and may be ready to start working on acquiring some self-soothing skills.

**Strategy #6 – Remain as Calm and Relaxed as Possible about the Sleep Issue**

If you are frustrated and angry when you deal with your child in the night, your child will inevitably pick up your vibes, even if you’re trying hard to hide your feelings.

Accepting the fact that some babies take a little longer to learn the sleep ropes and feeling confident that you can solve your child’s sleep problems will make it easier to cope with the middle-of-the-night sleep interruptions.

Scientific studies have shown that parents who have realistic expectations about parenthood and who feel confident in their own abilities to handle parenting difficulties find it easier to handle sleep challenges.