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## Sleep, Baby, Sleep

by Shelley Torres Aldeen

Several experiences recently got me to think about the subject of sleep: how much sleep children need and how we parents help children meet those needs. It has been a long time since my daughters were young, but I do remember that I used to rush around putting the house back in some presentable order while they napped. I would then sit on the sofa and read a few pages from a book and rest a few minutes. I was not a napper then, but I do recall how early I would go to bed each night, totally exhausted and ready for sleep.

The dictionary defines sleep as "the natural regularly recurring rest for the body, during which there is little or no conscious thought." This definition does not describe motherhood. Mothers are so connected to the baby that we are aware of the slightest movement or vocal sound the baby makes, no matter how far away the baby's room is.

Mothers and babies are interconnected for the first three years of the baby's life. It takes much energy for the mother to keep up with her baby. Rest in the form of sleep recharges our batteries so that we can get up the following morning and start all over again.

What about the baby? During the first year of life, babies need a lot of sleep. Human beings are the most evolved beings on earth, yet when

human beings are born, we are the most incomplete. We are born rather helpless and need the understanding of our parents to take care of us. We are born with the potential for growth and development, but must be given the time and the space to do so. Most maturation of the child's organs and growth to adult size takes place during sleep.

Penelope Leach tells us that "new babies sleep exactly the amount that their personal physiology tells them to sleep." Newborns drift in and out of sleep. The amount of time that the newborn sleeps is not within our control, but we can help the child "learn" the difference between awake time and sleep time. We simply put the child on his low bed when he needs to sleep and put him on the movement mat when it is time to be awake. When the child is awake, we spend time with him, playing, talking, and handling. We hang a mobile for the child to look at; give him a rattle to hold, taste, and shake; and give him space and time to learn about his body and how to move it. The child will make the connection of these two places: "This is where I sleep, this is where I work." Gradually, we also help the child move from his random sleep anytime, anywhere schedule to doing most of his sleeping during the night and doing most of his awake time in the day. Developing patterns

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of how life is lived in our home helps the child develop order, which gives him comfort and security.

How do we go about setting up routines?

I had lunch with a friend and her one-year-old child. Rainey kept herself busy carrying a very small zip-lock bag with cards and jewelry inside. She is at the stage where her toddling walk is refined by one hand carrying something and the other hand stretched out for balance. Every once in a while, Rainey would sit on the kitchen floor and pull out an object from her bag, look at it, turn it over, and look at the other side. Then she would try to put it back into the bag. So these were her activities for a while. Twice Rainey rubbed one of

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her eyes with the back of her hand. The mother walked over to Rainey and very matter-of-factly said, "Time for your nap, Rainey." Rainey looked up, gave her mom a smile and extended her arms to be carried. Off they went to the second floor. A few minutes later, my friend returned to the kitchen and turned on the intercom. For the next hour or more, we had an adult visit. Then we heard some gurgling sounds and laughter coming from the intercom. "Rainey's awake," my friend said and went upstairs to fetch her. Rainey returned from her nap all smiles and ready to start her work once more.

The following morning, Tuesday, while at my volunteer job at a shelter for mothers and their children, I was surprised to find one of the moms at home. She has an 18-month-old child. Cody goes to daycare from 8:00 in the morning to 6:00 in the evening while his mom is at school. The mom was just hanging out. I asked if Cody was in daycare and she said, "No. He's upstairs sleeping." It was 9:30 in the morning. At 12:30 when I went into the kitchen to eat lunch, I found out that Cody was still asleep. I asked what time he had gone to sleep (10 o'clock) which prompted me to ask what time he goes to sleep each night. Apparently, there is no set routine. When Cody wants to sleep, he sleeps and when he wants to get up, he gets up.

Another friend told me about baby-sitting her 8-month-old niece on Sunday in her home. They had a wonderful afternoon, she said, playing all sorts of baby games, from peek-a-boo to singing songs to crawling behind her and chasing balls. They had lots and lots of fun for approximately 3 hours, non-stop. She realized that Jane needed a nap when Jane became fussy, so she took her to the porto-crib that the parents had brought along. This is where the fussiness became so painful it was difficult to endure and so after 5-10 minutes of hearing this heart-rending cry, she

went into the room, sat on the floor and kept Jane company. Jane whimpered. Jane stood. Jane cried. Jane played. Jane whimpered some more. It took a long time for Jane to soothe herself to sleep. Looking back, she realized that she had spent the entire time entertaining Jane and making it difficult for her to fall asleep on her own. "She really fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion!"

One more story: a woman came to Casa Esperanza (a homeless shelter) for a visit with her 2-year-old son Matthew. It's just a short visit, she said, as she stood in the kitchen doorway, holding Matthew in her arms. There were several other women sitting around the kitchen table, all of us talking about children, school, work, and daily life in general. Matthew fell asleep and the mom moved on to one of the kitchen chairs. Each time one of us asked her if she would like to lay him down on a futon, she kept saying, "No, this is fine." All the talking and laughing we were doing did not seem to bother Matthew in the least; he kept on sleeping for more than two hours. The mom confided that if she wants Matthew to nap, she holds him in her arms or else he just refuses to sleep in the daytime. "Holding him helps me feel good as a mom," she said.

As these little stories indicate, parents and adult's expectations of children's sleep/nap schedules vary widely from person to person as well as from culture to culture. Some parents allow their children to take long naps in the daytime and then permit the children to stay up late at night. Other parents prefer short daytime naps and early bedtimes in the evening, say 7-8 p.m. Some parents allow their children to choose when, where, and how long they should sleep. Some parents help their children become dependent on them for nap times.

Recognizing the importance of sleep is essential for the child's health and well-being. An alert, awake child

functions best and learns best. We recognize this from our own experience-fatigue causes us to think poorly and work at a slower pace.

Most experts agree that it is important for parents to minimize sleep problems by being consistent, to view sleep as a useful habit, and to develop regular routines. Part of that routine is understanding that he needs to learn how to fall asleep on his own.

At what age should the child learn a sleep pattern or routine? Well, the earlier the better, but it is never too late for the child to learn to fall asleep on his own. What is required from the grown-ups is patience, meaning that we might have to get up several times during the night as we hear the child cry, interpret his crying communication and take care of his needs. It is helpful to us to understand that an over-tired child has more difficulty settling down to sleep; helping him to bed before this exhaustion point is very important for the child's welfare as well as the adult's.

There are "aids" we give him to help him fall asleep such as a stuffed animal or a pacifier. In the name of love, we help the child create a need that in effect, we control and later we break. How much easier his life would be if we remembered from the very beginning that the child needs to learn to become independent. A basic routine will meet the child's needs. The chart at the right can be useful in knowing what kind of sleep habits to expect.

A child's sleeping habits, says Dr. Montessori, can be helped "by placing a small mattress on the floor and covering it with a large blanket. A child can thus of his own accord go off cheerfully to bed in the evening and rise in the morning without disturbing anyone." It is very common for us human beings to follow nature to sleep when it is dark and to rise when it gets light.

With Montessori, we pay special attention to the environment because we believe that the environment it-

self teaches the child. We arrange the child's room into areas for sleeping, moving, feeding, and changing. In this way we give the child the idea that he is fitting into an already existing family life—that there is a time for everything and everything in its time.

There are all kinds of bedtime rituals that we can develop with our little ones, from singing lullabies to storytelling the events of the day; from reading books to before bed baths; from goodnight prayers to hugs and kisses. This list is endless. How do you say, "rest well, my baby"?

### Helpful reading

As parents, we find ourselves wondering about what expert's books to read and what advice to follow. There are so many books on raising children and parenting available at bookstores these days. Sometimes we are tempted to read them as if they have the magical recipe for how to raise a happy child. Then we notice that one expert tells us one thing and the next expert gives the opposite advice.

Montessori points the way by saying to us "follow the child." Mean-

ing that we will know best how to help the child through observation. If we follow Montessori's advice and develop our observation of not only our child but also of the environment surrounding him or her, we have a way of learning about the child's needs.

I remember reading a book by Dotty Turner Coplen where she said, "True knowledge comes when what someone has told us corresponds with what we observed. Only then do we know out of our own experience what is true." In that spirit, I offer the following list of books:

Maria Montessori. *The Child in the Family*. Oxford, England: Clio Press. (The Clio Montessori Series, Volume 8)

T. Berry Brazelton. *Touchpoints: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development*. Persus Books, 1992.

Gary Erxxo and Robert Bucknam, M.D. *On Becoming Baby Wise, Book One*. Mulnomah Books, 1995.

Penelope Leach. *Your Baby and Child. From Birth to Age Five*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

Jodi Mindell. *Sleeping Through the Night: How Infants, Toddlers and Their Parents Can Get a Good Night's Sleep*. Quill/Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.

William Sears, M.D. *The Baby Book*. Little Brown Company, 1993.

Jessica Teich and Brandel France de Bravo. *Trees Make the Best Mobiles*. St. Martin's Press, 2001.

Marc Weissbluth, M.D. *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*. Ballantine Books, 1987.



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AGE	DAY	NIGHT	TOTAL
Birth to 6 weeks	6 to 10 hours, in 2-4 hour stretches	6 to 10 hours, in 2-4 hour stretches	12 to 20 hours
6 wks to 6 months	7 to 10 hours, in 1-2 hour stretches	5-6 hours	12 to 16 hours
6 months to 1 year	two 1-2 hour naps	10-12 hours a night	12 to 16 hours
1 to 3 years	one 1-2 hour nap	10 to 12 hours	11 to 14 hours
3 to 6 years	one 1-2 hour nap possibly	10 hours	11 to 12 hours

Source: George Cohen, M.D. quoted in *Parenting Magazine*, September 2000.