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Your Health: A Parent's Hard Milestone --- Sleep training by letting babies cry is growing, and some doctors say even younger babies can learn

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Abstract

Despite many parents' anxiety about allowing infants to cry at night, research shows such training methods don't negatively affect children's mental and physical health. There is little research comparing sleep-training methods, says Jodi Mindell, associate director of the Sleep Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Full Text

Babies as young as 2 months old can be taught to sleep through the night by being left to cry, says a large and prominent pediatrics practice in New York and Los Angeles.

Tribeca Pediatrics is among the most ardent proponents of the sleep-training practice, also known as extinction, in which parents don't intervene when a baby cries after bedtime. Some sleep experts say the method has gained broader acceptance among parents. However, Tribeca is unusual in recommending sleep training at such a young age.

Getting an infant used to sleeping through the night may be one of the most-discussed topics by new parents, but the best method and age to do it is little researched by scientists. Other leading pediatricians and sleep experts say 4 to 6 months seems a more natural time to try sleep training.

Michel Cohen, Tribeca Pediatrics' founder, began advocating sleep training at 2 months a decade ago based on his experiences with his own children and those of his patients. Doctors out of residency quickly make it their approach, he says, while the more seasoned ones are slower to warm to it.

Most doctors at Tribeca Pediatrics, which has 16 offices around New York City and two in Los Angeles, opt to first discuss sleep training with parents at the 1-month visit and recommend attempting the process at 2 months old, Dr. Cohen says. "It actually works better at 2 months than at 4 months. It is tougher when the baby is used to more soothing," says Dr. Cohen, who divides his time between seeing patients and managing the business.

The cry-it-out method is one tactic parents may try. Many also try a modified approach that involves coming in to console the child at increasingly longer intervals. That can sometimes make the process slower and cause babies to cry more when the parent leaves the room, says Craig Canapari, director of the Yale Pediatric Sleep Center. If parents are going to do checks, they should make it quick, with no lights or consoling. Tell children you love them, that they're fine and that it is time to go to sleep. Then leave the room, he says.

While sleep training at 2 months may work, Dr. Canapari says there is no research to support the approach. At 2 months old, most infants aren't naturally sleeping through the night, whereas the behavior of many 4-to-6-month olds suggests it is natural at that age, he says.

Despite many parents' anxiety about allowing infants to cry at night, research shows such training methods don't negatively affect children's mental and physical health. In a 2012 study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, researchers in Australia followed 326 children from 7 months of age for five years. About half the babies were randomly assigned to undergo a behavioral sleep intervention, including extinction. This group had no long-term harm to their emotional development, stress regulation, mental health or relationship with their parents, the study found.

"I cite that article frequently with parents who are concerned that sleep training is going to result in some sort of psychological damage or attachment problem," says Judith Owens, director of sleep medicine at Boston Children's Hospital. Sleep training also helps infants develop self-regulation skills, she says.

Still, 2 months is too early for sleep training, Dr. Owens says. "Infants at that age are not capable of sleeping through the night," she says. Instead, they typically sleep for three to four hours, followed by several hours awake throughout the 24 hour day, she says.

During sleep training babies typically cry a lot for the first couple of nights before reducing it considerably, says Dr. Canapari, of Yale. Sometimes the crying can get worse on night two or three, but this only lasts a day or two, he says.

How long a baby can be left to cry depends a lot on the parent's threshold, sleep experts say. Allowing a baby to cry for more than an hour isn't harmful for several days while sleep training, though most babies won't cry that long, they say. If the amount of crying doesn't decline within a week, it is best to talk to your pediatrician.

There is little research comparing sleep-training methods, says Jodi Mindell, associate director of the Sleep Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

"I think what parents need to do is pick a strategy that they absolutely can deal with," Dr. Mindell says. "It is much worse to let your child cry for 30 minutes or 60 minutes and then go to them, as that will simply reinforce the crying. I would much prefer a family go in quickly if they're going to go in at all."

Dr. Mindell says parents should expect many potential bumps in the road during sleep training -- a child gets sick or is on vacation, for example. Development milestones, such as

when a child is learning to walk or pull up, also often result in sleep disturbances.

Yasmin Lyons, a pediatrician in one of Tribeca Pediatrics' New York City offices, says first-time parents are usually hesitant but most of her patients successfully sleep train shortly after the 2-month visit. Many children will cry for 30 to 40 minutes, sleep for a couple of hours, then wake up and cry again.

"It works best if the parents don't give in," Dr. Lyons says. "Otherwise the next time they try to do sleep training, it's that much harder."

Parental behavior may play a role in infant sleep, according to a recent study, published online in February in the Journal of Sleep Research. Parents who are quicker to respond to a crying infant are more likely to have children who can't sleep through the night, the study found.

Many parents aren't comfortable allowing their babies to cry by themselves. Couples also can disagree over whether it is traumatic for the baby and parents. And sharp divisions on the subject sometimes surface on parent listservs and social media.

"Sometimes I have to refrain from commenting or reading it because it's upsetting to me," says Rosanne Farano-Romanino, a 37-year-old mother of three young children, who says she hears of moms sleep training a few weeks after bringing their babies home from the hospital.

Ms. Farano-Romanino, who owns a wedding floral and decor design company in Vaughan, Ontario, says she and her husband took a "more gentle approach" by sleeping in the same bed with the children. "It is what felt natural to us." At about 2 years old, each of the children transitioned to their own room and beds. The children, now 6 and 4 years old and 20 months, "know they're welcome to come to us if they need to," though that happens rarely, she says.

Other parents say they wish they had followed their doctor's sleep training advice earlier. Suzanne Oliva, a stay-at-home mom of four in Bedford, N.Y., says when Dr. Cohen broached the topic of sleep training with her first child, she wanted nothing to do with it.

"It was miserable," Ms. Oliva says about the next seven months. "He was sleep-deprived and as a new parent I thought if your baby cries, you need to get him." She tried sleep training and after a couple of nights her baby was sleeping through the night. Her second child slept through the night on her own. She sleep trained her third child at 3 months and her fourth child at 2 months. Each time the process only took a few days. "Children need sleep and as parents we should help them get it," she says.

(See related letters: "Letters to the Editor: Dictatorship Unnecessary for Babies to Sleep" -- WSJ May 7, 2016)

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