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Night Feeding

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Vicki Williams sheds some light on the benefits of night feeds

It is no real surprise that the lure of using controlled crying and other 'sleep training' methods to gain more sleep is so powerful. Exhausted parents, at the end of their reserves, are easily persuaded, especially when their health professionals advocate it. Tragically many of these health professionals and self-professed 'sleep experts' only know that it does work, not why. If they knew why it worked or the potential consequences, they might be a little more reluctant to suggest it and keener to encourage tired mums to feed their babies at night.

In essence, sleep training aims to teach a child not to ask for his needs to be met during hours specified by his parent(s). It does not teach a child not to have those needs, for comfort, food, drink during the night, but it does teach that child that whatever his needs, they are not likely to be met. Children learn fast, and it only takes a few sessions to teach the 'rules', but many parents have started to question what lessons they really want their children to learn, and to ask if teaching a child that their needs are dictated by the adults is a helpful long-term strategy to getting more sleep. If you want to know more about the potential effects or about other methods, there are some great scholarly articles,[1] some lovely empowering books with evidence-based information[2] and baby-centred courses[3] out there.

Parenting groups and forums are full of parents who are sleep-deprived, stressed and anxious. Some because of their children's night-time needs, others because of the pressure being exerted from outside to solve the issues of night waking, yet few are asking if the night waking is a problem that actually needs to be solved. Breastfeeding often shoulders the blame, and mothers who are breastfeeding are frequently in the position where it is their input that is needed, and some mothers are even persuaded to stop night feeding, or even breastfeeding altogether, to solve the problem. There is no doubt thattiredness is not good for anyone's health and wellbeing, least of all for the parent who spends their day meeting the needs of a dependent young per son, but is there more going on than first meets the eye?

There are also some really important things happening during night feeds which you may or may not know, and itjust goes to show how truly amazing our bodies are.

Firstly, breastmilk is easy to digest and passes rapidly through a baby's immature digestive system. This means that they need to feed frequently. Frequent feeding is a good thing, it means your baby is sure to have a stable blood sugar level, without the meal-related peaks and troughs known only too well to adults and to the parents of hungry or 'sugar-fuelled' children. The rapid passage of food through the gut

is also protective against gastric upsets as pathogens are rapidly flushed through.

The next, and arguably the most important, thing to know is that night waking is normal behaviour for babies and adults. Older children and adults meet their needs (hunger, thirst, loo, comfort, rearrange the blankets and so on) and then go back to sleep, or not. Babies not only have the same needs as older humans, they are also programmed to check regularly they are safe by waking and signalling to their parent that they are alone. It is a good thing from an evolutionary perspective, and it might also be a factor in helping to prevent cot-death.

Babies aren't born knowing day from night, it takes time for their natural body cycle to establish, and whilst it does that, our breastmilk is high in our sleep hormone melatonin and in the protein tryptophan which our bodies use to produce serotonin, a hormone involved in the regulation of mood, appetite, sleep, memory and learning. It isn't just the suckling that is comforting, breastmilk really does make babies sleepy. Breastmilk production and the hormones associated with breastfeeding follow our natural sleep cycle, and prolactin is highest in the early hour s of the morning, making our milk production highest then, which means that night feeding boosts supply.

Now for something less well publicised. Breastfeeding mothers actually get more sleep than their bottle-feeding peers. According to one study, breastfeeding parents got an average of 40-45 minutes more sleep per night during the first three months than parents who were formula feeding or supplementing in the evenings.[4] Over a three month period, that is a lot more sleep, and as being short of just 30 minutes' sleep a day can result in a loss offunction, it might just be crucial. Research also tells us that sleep deprivation is a factor in postnatal depression, so any extra sleep may make a big difference.[5]

Our bodies don't get it wrong often, and this is just one more situation where evolution got it right; we just got so tired we missed the message.

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References

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