

Sleeping Through the Night

Written by Katherine Dettwyler, Ph.D.

Monday, 01 March 2004 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 17 April 2014 10:42

This essay was originally directed to one person. It has been edited slightly to make it less specific.

Someone from parent-I passed along a post about children sleeping through the night on to me and asked me to respond. I was one of the original parent-I folks, but haven't been on for a long time. I am an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Nutrition at Texas A&M University, and I do research on infant/child feeding beliefs/practices both cross-culturally and from an evolutionary perspective, as well as research on children's health and growth. I know from firsthand experience that being a new parent is a difficult time of adjustment, especially when expectations don't match reality, especially when our culture has taught us that children should have certain needs / wants / behaviors and then our children don't seem to fit that mold. This problem of a mismatch between expectations and reality can be very difficult for new parents to accept and adjust to. Sometimes, some children can be encouraged / convinced / forced to fit the mold of cultural expectations, and they do fine.



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by Katherine Dettwyler, Ph.D.
Department of Anthropology,
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Someone from parent-I passed along a post about children sleeping through the night on to me and asked me to respond. I was one of the original parent-I folks, but haven't been on for a long time. I am an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Nutrition at Texas A&M University, and I do research on infant/child feeding beliefs/practices both cross-culturally and from an evolutionary perspective, as well as research on children's health and growth. I know from firsthand experience that being a new parent is a difficult time of adjustment, especially when expectations

don't match reality, especially when our culture has taught us that children should have certain needs / wants / behaviors and then our children don't seem to fit that mold. This problem of a mismatch between expectations and reality can be very difficult for new parents to accept and adjust to. Sometimes, some children can be encouraged / convinced / forced to fit the mold of cultural expectations, and they do fine. Other times, though they do eventually fit the mold, it is at the expense of their sense of who they are, their self-confidence, their view of the world as a safe and trusting place, sometimes, even, at the expense of their health or life. Probably nowhere do cultural expectations and the reality of children's needs conflict more than in the two areas of breastfeeding frequency and sleeping behavior.

Human children are designed (whether you believe by millions of years of evolution, or by God, I don't know) to nurse very frequently, based on the composition of the milk of the species, the fact that all higher primates (primates are the zoological order to which humans belong, higher primates include monkeys and apes) keep their offspring in the mother's arms or on her back for several years, the size of the young child's stomach, the rapidly with which breast milk is digested, the need for an almost constant source of nutrients to grow that huge brain (in humans, especially), and so on. By very frequently, I mean 3-4 times per hour, for a few minutes each time. The way in which some young infants are fed in our culture—trying to get them to shift to a 3-4 hour schedule, with feedings of 15-30 minutes at a time, goes against our basic physiology.

But humans are very adaptable, and some mothers will be able to make sufficient milk with this very infrequent stimulation and draining of the breasts, and some children will be able to adapt to large meals spaced far apart. Unfortunately, some mothers don't make enough milk with this little nursing, and some babies can't adjust, and so we fuss, cry a lot, seem to want to nurse "before it is time" and fall to grow and thrive. Of course, usually the mother's body is blamed—"You can't make enough milk"—rather than the culturally imposed expectation that feeding every 3-4 hours should be sufficient, and the mother begins supplementing with formula, which leads to a steady spiral downward to complete weaning from the breast. Human children are also designed to have breast milk be a part of their diet for a minimum of 3-5 years, with many indications pointing to 6-7 years as the true physiological duration of breastfeeding—regardless of what your cultural beliefs may be. I can provide you with references to my research on this topic if you wish to read more.

The same is true of sleeping. Human children are designed to be sleeping with their parents. The sense of touch is the most important sense to primates, along with sight. Young primates are carried on their mother's body and sleep with her for years after birth, often until well after weaning. The expected pattern is for mother and child to sleep together, and for child to be able to nurse whenever they want during the night. Normal, healthy, breastfed and co-sleeping children do not sleep "through the night" (say 7-9 hours at a stretch) until they are 3-4 years old, and no longer need night nursing. I repeat—this is NORMAL and HEALTHY. Dr. James McKenna's research on

co-sleeping clearly shows the dangers of solitary sleeping in young infants, who slip into abnormal patterns of very deep sleep from which it is very difficult for them to rouse themselves when they experience an episode of apnea (stopping breathing). When co-sleeping, the mother is monitoring the baby's sleep and breathing patterns, even though she herself is asleep. When the baby has an episode of apnea, she rouses the baby by her movements and touch. This is thought to be the primary mechanism by which co-sleeping protects children from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. In other words, many cases of SIDS in solitary sleeping children are thought to be due to them having learned to sleep for long stretches at a time at a very early age, so they find themselves in these deep troughs of sleep, then they may experience an episode of apnea, and no one is there to notice or rouse them from it, so they just never start breathing again. Co-sleeping also allows a mother to monitor the baby's temperature during the night, to be there if they spit up and start to choke, and just to provide the normal, safe environment that the baby's child has been designed to expect.

Is this comment for parents? Not if this is difficult for some new parents to adjust to! Yes! No doubt about it, the gap between what our culture teaches us to expect of the sleep patterns of a young child (read them a story, tuck them in, turn out the light, and not see them again for 8 hours) and the reality of how children actually sleep if healthy and normal, yawns widely. But the first steps to dealing with the fact that your young child doesn't sleep through the night, or doesn't want to sleep without you is to realize that (1) Not sleeping through the night until they are 3 or 4 years of age is

normal and healthy behavior for human infants. (2) Your children are not being difficult or manipulative, they are being normal and healthy, and behaving in ways that are appropriate for our species. Once you understand these simple truths, it becomes much easier to deal with parenting your child at night. Once you give up the idea that you must have 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep at night, and view these nighttime interactions with your child as precious and loving, you get used to them very quickly. I highly recommend Dr. Sears' book on Nighttime Parenting (available from the La Leche League International Catalog). Our children's early years represent the most important and influential time of their lives. It passes all too quickly that meeting your child's needs during these first few years will pay off in many ways in the years to come.

Feel free to respond, argue, disagree, ask questions, ask for references, etc. Or visit my web page at www.kenned.org/dettwyler/dettwyler.html. Dr. Katherine A. Dettwyler is now a semi-retired Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at Texas A&M University, where she taught from 1997 to 2000. She is the author of *Dancing Skeletons: Life and Death in West Africa*, which recounts tales of her fieldwork on child health in West Africa. Dettwyler was awarded the 1999 Margaret Wood Award from the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology. She is also the co-editor of *Breastfeeding: Situational Perspectives*, which includes her own two chapters "Breast and the Bread: The Cultural Context of Breastfeeding in the United States," and "A Time to Wean: The Historical Blueprint for a Natural Age of Weaning in Modern Human Populations."

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Is this convenient for parents? No!

Is this difficult for some new parents to adjust to? Yes!

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