

Screaming to Sleep: The Moral Imperative to End Cry it Out

Written by Amy Wright Glenn

Monday, 01 June 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 08:51

I remember the scene vividly.

I'm around 1½ years old. Recently separated from my mother, my grandmother cares for me. I see myself standing in my crib at my grandparents' home. It's dark. I am crying and crying. I don't know what I did that was so wrong. I'm confused, utterly distraught. So, I climb out of my crib and walk through the house. I find my grandmother in the kitchen, cleaning. I cling to her leg, crying, begging. I want to be picked up. I am a good girl! I tell her.

Years later my grandmother confirms the story. She said it broke her heart to ignore my cries. She was pressured to make me cry myself to sleep by her husband, my grandfather, and by her

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Given this biological reality, Narvaez is deeply concerned about the negative impact that cry-it-out (CIO) methods of approaching infant/toddler sleep have on children.

She warns: When a baby's needs are dismissed or ignored, the child develops a sense of mistrust of relationships and the world. And self-confidence is undermined. The child may spend a lifetime trying to fill the resulting inner emptiness.

CIO is also painful for connected caregivers to experience. Consider the story of a new mother standing in the shower with her hands over her ears so she doesn't have to hear her daughter

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Many new parents experience a great deal of pressure to let their babies or toddlers CIO. Whether this pressure comes from medical professionals, loved ones or a parenting partner, it can feel relentless and confusing.

To their credit, professionals advocating CIO do so because it works. Over time, the practice of CIO certainly does end the crying (cueing behavior) of babies and toddlers. Dr. Jodi A. Mindell, a psychology professor at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, advises parents to be consistent when it comes to using CIO. They need to pick a plan they can absolutely follow through on, she states.

While there is much to laud about consistency and routine when it comes to best parenting practices, consistency in and of itself is morally neutral. After all, one can be consistently unkind. What matters most is that parents are consistent in nurturing their children, not ignoring them. The only caveat here relates to the emotional stability of the caregiver. In a moment of profound frustration, it is wise

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When I consider what it would be like to purposefully leave my toddler alone to cry his way into an exhausted slumber, I shudder. The reaction is visceral. I don't need a moral theory to more deeply persuade me that such a course of action goes against the clearly guided instinct I have to care for my son. Nevertheless, I am a scholar of ethics and find affirmation in the fact that ethical systems the world over insist upon our moral obligation to do no harm.

Do No Harm

At times, these three words may seem archaic and hopelessly idealistic upon perusing headline news. When considering the billions spent on war, it's clear that many institutions are relentlessly involved in the profiteering of harm. Nevertheless, each moment offers us a choice. We can add to the collective pain burdening the human family, or we can do what we can to alleviate it. While we may believe that some people (those labeled as terrorists, murderers, rapists, etc.) deserve to be harmed, the intentional harming of innocents is universally condemned and morally repugnant.

Upon discovering how harmful CIO is, we have an obligation to end this practice of purposefully neglecting our children at nighttime. Dr. Richard Ferber himself admitted he had little knowledge of infant psychology. So, why turn to his method for advice? As the popular parenting slogan goes, "When we know better, we do better."

Research is clear: The school of thought regarding infant/toddler sleep known as CIO (in all of its forms) harms the most precious and innocent among us. To knowingly harm babies and children is wrong. Period. May we work for a day when CIO is looked upon like the ancient practice of Chinese foot binding is today: archaic, harmful and best relegated to the pages of history.

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