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Sweet dreams: How to create a baby sleep plan

BY MICHELLE S. DONAGHY

A few months without sleep, you're ready to help your baby learn to sleep through the night. If your child is 6 months or older and still waking during the night, it's time to make a sleep plan.

Sleep 101: Sleep is a learned skill, and teaching a brand new skill to your baby is no small task.

Sleep associations: What are they? Do you rock or feed your baby until they're completely asleep? If yes, this is your child's sleep association. Sleep-learning begins with changing your baby's sleep association.

Here's how to create a plan:

1 New bedtime routine. A calm and predictable routine will help your baby prepare for sleep. If a pre-bedtime feed is part of your routine, move the feed to the beginning of the routine - with lights on. Then continue with the rest of your routine. Your routine could be pajamas, feed (but not to sleep), followed by (pick one or two) reading books, singing a song, massaging or story time.

2 Best bedtime. Figure out your child's ideal bedtime. For most children, it's between 6 and 8 p.m. Look for sleepy signs such as yawning, rubbing eyes or fussing.

3 Sleep-training method. Will you use a gentle method, where you stay with your child while she learns and you gradually fade out your assistance? Or will you leave the room to give your child a few minutes unattended, then every 5 or 10 minutes (when crying) go in to reassure? Keep each visit brief and do not pick up or touch your child.

4 Start at bedtime. Bedtime is the easiest time for children to learn to put themselves to sleep. Put



your child into bed while awake - this is critical to your success.

5 Night feed or none. Decide if you will feed your child during the night. Check with your child's doctor and ask if he needs to eat at night. If yes, keep it brief, with lights off and right back into bed.

6 Plan naps. Skipped or short naps will create more night waking and some bedtime, an overtired baby. Well-slept children sleep better at night. Children need a nap of 60 min in the day and the timing is based on age. Follow these guidelines to plan your child's naps: 6-9 months, nap every two and a half to three hours; 9-15 months, nap every three to four hours; 15-36 months, one nap at noon or 1 p.m.

7 Be consistent. Once you've started your sleep plan, it is absolutely critical to be consistent. Every time you give in or assist your child to sleep, expect more tears tomorrow night, success to take longer, your baby to learn to cry more.

Expect huge improvements in week one and for the entire plan to take two weeks - if you have been consistent.

Michelle S. Donaghy is a level 1 baby/child sleep consultant and certified Gentle Sleep Coach. She is the founder of MSH Baby Sleep Coach (mshbabysleepcoach.com) and has two children.