

On Infants Sleeping Alone

Our infant son, Jeff, was only 7 months old when very early one morning my wife and I heard a loud *smack* we thought was a magazine falling off a table in his room adjacent to our own. Imagine our amazement and confusion when less than a minute later he crawled and giggled happily toward our bed as he spotted us and anticipated being in our proximity. The memory of the height of that fall coupled with the noise associated with it still gives us chills. But the fact that it is absurd that our son did not get hurt is no more absurd than the ideologies that argued for him being there away from us in the first place, sleeping solitarily, unlike most other human infants in the non-Western world who routinely sleep right next to caregivers who feed, protect, nurture, and, for all intents and purposes, regulate them all throughout the night, much as they do during the day.

We should have known that it would eventually come to this, because like so many other Western parents we were failed Ferberizers, an adjective used in popular culture to describe parents who tried a sleep training strategy once advocated by pediatric sleep expert Richard Ferber (who has recently repudiated the practice) that aimed to teach infants to fall asleep alone without parental intervention. In theory, the method is simple: Place infants in a crib while awake and let them fall asleep alone. In the beginning, they will likely need to “cry-it-out” at least for varying lengths of time before parents allow themselves to enter to comfort the infant for a few minutes before leaving again. Eventually, the infant is supposed to give up and learn that falling asleep alone is the only possibility. The problem is that infants are capable of crying hysterically for far longer periods of time than parents are able to withstand it. Most parents cannot emotionally tolerate the sustained and often desperate sobs of their infant, whose only desire, which is biologically based, is to be with them and to use his or her cry to signal that something is terribly wrong.

When I actually entered my son’s room during a Ferberizing session and saw how desperate and, yet, how obviously lovingly grateful he was for my apparent retrieval, it broke my heart. I vowed I would never subject him to such cruelty again, and even now that Ferberizing session remains an hour of my life that I truly regret.

As new parents, my wife and I first suspected that something was strange in the received wisdom of experts about how infants “should” sleep when we came across a rather odd warning found in a supposedly user-friendly guide to infant sleep published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, a kind of *Infant Sleep for Dummies* intended to help new parents through the first year. The first message in the book read: “Never let a baby fall asleep at the breast”; breastfeeding, we imagined, was the very context in which an infant’s falling asleep evolved! Sure enough, we found that it was impossible to prevent an infant from falling asleep at the breast, and, indeed, the natural progression of the breastfeeding session, especially in the first few months of our son’s life, seemed designed to facilitate not only his sleep but his mother’s, too! It seemed we were already violating sacred dos and don’ts.

Parents need to be very careful, the guide warned, not to start any bad habits, like letting infants fall asleep in the parents’ bed in bodily contact, since many Western pediatricians and sleep training advocates consider adult-child co-sleeping as a bad habit. Accordingly, rather than considering it a positive kind of association or a loving, protective, and highly emotionally satisfying way to enjoy one’s baby, Western infant sleep clinicians think of it as a negative association. Looking back on our early experiences with our child, our culturally conditioned tendency to do as medically told led us to abdicate and dismiss our intuitive knowledge and emotions in favor of external authorities who knew neither us nor our son.

And it was not just medical authorities who claimed to have all the right answers. Brothers, sisters, postal clerks, cashiers, aunts, uncles, lifeguards, in-laws (with or without children of their own), and especially other parents and grandparents all seemed to have access to uncompromising golden insights on child-rearing skills denied to us. We were presented with a one-size-must-fit-all approach to the question of how and where our son was to sleep (alone, throughout the night as early in life as possible, unattended, and with minimal feeds, we were told), supposedly for the sake of his normal social, moral, and emotional development.

Those uninvited warnings and bits of advice regarding our infant’s sleep habits suggested that we best prepare for a kind of war, a battle of sorts between ourselves and our infant son, that we (his parents) simply must win, lest we be accused of lacking in moral discipline, harboring excessive neediness, or, worse, permitting our child to manipulate and use us, while spoiling him! I suppose we should not have been so surprised to find within a culture that idealizes individualism and autonomy over familial interdependence that a presumed medical “good” such as self-soothing—an infant’s ability to put herself back to sleep without parental intervention—had also assumed an all-desirable positive moral value. That is, if it were deemed medically good for infants to sleep alone and through the night, it seemed just a short step away from concluding that good babies must do so! “Has your baby slept through the night yet?” Rarely does one hear “Oh, what a good baby” when a parent responds: “No, actually, he only sleeps through the night when he sleeps with us.”

There is an excellent reason why infants cry when outside the supervision and contact of their parents: Over the course of evolution, it was dangerous for infants to be alone, and they are not biologically designed for it. In Western society, the question should never have been: Is it safe to sleep with your baby? Rather, the question should always have been: Is it safe not to? Babies know this. Mothers know this. Perhaps what we need now is not less cosleeping but, rather, more parents who trust in the millions of years of our evolution in which mothers (and fathers), even without the benefits of a parenting guide, managed the survival of their babies.

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