

Understanding Infant Sleep Associations

How Babies Learn to Sleep (And Why It Matters)

What Are Infant Sleep Associations?

Infant sleep associations are habits or conditions that babies learn to connect with falling asleep. These associations can be objects, actions, or environments that help your baby drift off at bedtime or naptime. Common examples include rocking, nursing or bottle feeding, pacifiers, white noise, or being held. Over time, babies come to expect these cues whenever they are falling asleep.

Night Wakings Are Normal (For Everyone)

It's important to know that waking up several times during the night is a normal part of the human sleep cycle — for infants, children, and adults alike. You and I both wake up briefly throughout the night, but because we know how to settle back to sleep, these moments usually go unnoticed. We might adjust our pillow, roll over, or simply close our eyes and fall asleep again without any help.

How Sleep Associations Affect Babies

Babies, just like adults, wake between sleep cycles. The difference is that if a baby has learned to fall asleep with a specific association, such as being rocked or fed, they will expect the same help every time they wake during the night. If your baby is always rocked or nursed to sleep at bedtime, when they naturally wake up, they'll need to be rocked or fed again to return to sleep.

This means that unless your baby learns to fall asleep on their own at bedtime, they may need your help each time they wake up through the night. You won't be able to stop your baby from waking up, but you can help them learn to self-soothe and return to sleep independently.

What Does “Sleeping Through the Night” Really Mean?

Sleeping through the night doesn't mean your baby never wakes up. Instead, it means that when they do wake up (as everyone does), they're able to put themselves back to sleep without needing your help. For most parents, this is the goal: a baby who can soothe themselves and fall asleep again easily, leading to longer stretches of rest for everyone.

Sleep Training: Teaching Self-Soothing Skills

Sleep training is the process of helping your baby learn to fall asleep independently at bedtime and after night wakings. The aim is for your baby to develop the ability to settle themselves without being rocked, fed, or otherwise assisted. This doesn't mean you leave your baby to cry alone, but rather that you gradually teach them the skills needed to fall asleep by themselves. Over time, this can lead to better sleep for both your baby and you.

Key Takeaways

- Sleep associations are cues your baby connects with falling asleep.
- Everyone wakes up during the night; the difference is in knowing how to get back to sleep independently.
- If a baby is used to being rocked or fed to sleep, they'll need the same help each time they wake up.
- "Sleeping through the night" means your baby can put themselves back to sleep without your help.
- Sleep training teaches babies to self-soothe and sleep independently.