

A Conversation with Janet Krone Kennedy, PhD and Pamela Druckerman

You write that “a child’s needs must come before his wants.” How does this relate to sleep?

A child who is waking up in the night (or refusing to sleep in the first place) wants contact and soothing from the parents or caregiver. But she needs to sleep. And the contact/soothing is actually stimulating and depriving the baby of sleep. It’s the probably earliest example of the need for limit setting. The parent has to decide to do something that might make the baby uncomfortable (essentially saying no) because she needs something else (to learn how to sleep). I often tell parents to imagine that the baby is yelling out for something ridiculous—like cake—in the middle of the night. It’s easier to say no to that.

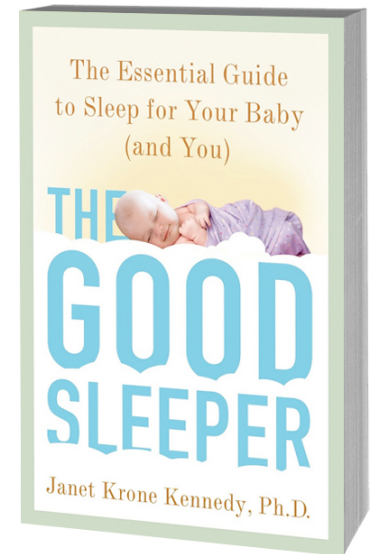
Many new parents assume (and fear) that they’ll be waking up at night for at least the first year of their baby’s life. Are these night wake-ups inevitable? At what age are most babies capable, in theory, of sleeping through the night? Why does it often take longer for them to actually start doing this?

Absolutely not inevitable! Most babies can sleep through the night from twelve weeks of age, often sooner. Michel Cohen would say eight weeks. Newborns obviously need to feed frequently and that means night waking. But as they get bigger and more efficient at feeding, they take in more calories at each feeding. And then they are able to take in enough calories in the daytime to last through the night. It’s no longer about feeling full. It’s about caloric intake. And once they can take in twenty-four hours’ worth of calories in twelve hours, they start to sleep better because the metabolism slows down at night, allowing deeper, more restorative sleep. But a baby who is fed throughout the night is not going to be hungry enough during the day to take in enough calories for the next night. So a cycle begins.

Parents often misinterpret night waking as hunger and they continue the twenty-four-hour feeding clock. The French have it right with “the pause” that you write about. They make sure that the baby is really awake and really hungry before feeding. Night waking is caused by over-fatigue (adrenaline) and habit reinforced by parents. It’s solved by removing the reinforcement (feeding/attention/soothing)—whether gradually or with crying—and by keeping the baby well rested with good naps and an appropriately early bedtime.

You describe parents as a baby’s “sleep facilitator.” What are some things parents can do to help their babies become better sleepers? What about letting babies cry or fuss at night? Might babies be traumatized by this?

Parents can help babies become better sleepers by understanding drowsiness cues and the importance of avoiding over-fatigue, making sure that babies get good naps, establishing bedtime routines, and putting them to bed early. They can foster self-soothing and teach babies to fall asleep in the crib instead of while being fed or held. And they can teach them to sleep through the night by letting them return to sleep independently. That often involves fussing and crying, which is perfectly safe and appropriate.



Babies are not traumatized by crying—they cry all the time. Crying alone at night for an isolated period of days does not constitute any sort of harmful stress even when the crying is prolonged or very intense. I have researched this backwards and forwards and there is simply no data to support the idea that crying is bad or harmful when used in this way (despite everything you read on the Web). And I've helped hundreds of families through this process—some in extreme states of sleep deprivation. I have also had some parents tell me that they won't try it. But those that do end up wishing they had done it sooner. No one has ever told me that they regret teaching a baby to sleep by letting her cry.

Is it really true that the more a baby sleeps during the day, the longer she'll sleep at night? This seems counter-intuitive.

It's true. Babies sleep best when they are well rested. When they get overtired, the body releases adrenaline and that interferes with sleep quality and duration, as well as the ability to self-soothe.

Do you have any advice for adults who are poor sleepers? Is there any baby sleep wisdom that also applies to us? Does the napping rule apply to grown-ups?

I have a lot of advice for adults. I'm hoping to write a book about it at some point! Adult sleep is different. Napping doesn't help night sleep in adults and it can be disruptive. Napping can distort the body clock, causing shorter night sleep—from insomnia to night waking or early waking. Short naps (20-40 minutes) that are not too late in the day (before 3 p.m.) can be helpful for some people. Others are sensitive to even that much daytime sleep or have such a hard time waking up from a short nap that it's not worth it. Long naps are very likely to disrupt night sleep. The baby sleep wisdom that does apply is the importance of routine and making time in your schedule for sleep. Bedtime routines help us unwind and separate the business of the day from nighttime. Reading before bed is particularly helpful as long as you do not read on a backlit device (they suppress melatonin). Reading distracts your mind and allows your body to relax. Otherwise, thoughts can run wild, making us stressed and causing an adrenaline release.