Fact Sheet: Sleep Training

Is It Safe & Effective?

What is Sleep Training?

- Most methods of sleep training involve parents temporarily using behavioral strategies to help improve their infant's sleep (Mindell, Kuhn, Lewin, Meltzer, & Sadeh, 2006).
- The vast majority of sleep training methods involve the parent putting the child to bed "drowsy but awake" (Mindell et al., 2006, p. 1267).
- Almost all sleep training methods aim to help babies fall asleep independently and put themselves back to sleep when waking in the night (Mindell et al., 2006).

Does Sleep Training Work?

- Both controlled crying (i.e., "Ferber") and bedtime fading have been shown to result in significant decreases in nighttime wakings (Gradisar et al., 2016).
- The vast majority of sleep training studies show that sleep training works, and that most kids still sleep better 3-6 months later (Mindell et al., 2006).
- The research is highly supportive of total extinction ("cry it out") and parenting education (Mindell et al., 2006).
- Other sleep training methods that have been shown to be effective are controlled crying, fading, routines and scheduled awakenings (Mindell et al., 2006).
- According to Price, Wake, Okoumunne, & Hiscock (2012), parents should feel comfortable using techniques like controlled comforting (i.e., "Ferber") and camping out.

What Are The Long-Term Effects Of Sleep Training?

- While some argue that cry it out methods of sleep training result in insecure attachment, increased stress and later emotional or behavioral issues, a study by Gradisar et al. (2016) did not find any of these negative outcomes.
- Sleep training does not have a long-term negative impact on the mother or child's mental health or on parenting practices (Hiscock, Bayer, Hampton, & Ukoumunne, & Wake, 2008).
- Research on the long-term effects of sleep training does not show either positive or negative affects on the mom, child or the mother-child relationship five years later (Price et al., 2012).
- Five years following sleep training, children who were sleep trained and children who weren't showed no differences in their stress levels, parent-child attachment or closeness, sleep issues or emotional or behavioral scores (Price et al., 2012).

Does Sleep Training Result In Increased Cortisol (Stress Hormones)?

One well-known study (Middlemiss, Granger, Goldberg, & Nathans, 2012) claims that:

- Following cry it out (aka extinction), infants have increased stress levels, even though they no longer cry while falling asleep (Middlemiss et al., 2012).
- The cry it out method of sleep training has been shown to work in three days, however it may take longer for the child's stress levels to decrease (Middlemiss et al., 2012).
- The cry it out method may temporarily result in mother and infant stress levels not being aligned (Middlemiss et al., 2012).

However, Price, Hiscock & Gradisar (2013) contend that:

- Popular media uses the Middlemiss et al. (2012) study to claim that sleep training is dangerous, even though this was not the intention of the paper (Price et al., 2013).
- The researchers of the Middlemiss et al. (2012) study speak of infant stress levels being "high" throughout sleep training, however the levels are actually never compared to any baseline levels; therefore we cannot know if levels were high or not (Price et al., 2013).
- There is no evidence that stress levels in the infants in the Middlemiss et al. (2012) study changed at all during the sleep training program (Price et al., 2013).

What Are Some Other Potential Benefits Of Sleep Training?

- Mothers who sleep train are less likely to be depressed two years following the intervention (Hiscock et al., 2008).
- Based strictly on measurements of morning cortisol, children who have undergone cry it out or fading are less stressed one year later, while children who were not sleep trained experience no change in stress levels (Gradisar et al., 2016).
- Most mothers who sleep train say they have a better relationship with their child following sleep training (Hiscock et al., 2008).
- Mothers who have used sleep training tend to report improvements in the child's mood in the morning, as well as in quality of sleep (Mindell, et al., 2011).

References

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