ENCOURAGING INDEPENDENT SLEEP ASSOCIATIONS IN THE FIRST FOUR MONTHS OF LIFE

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As practitioners we need to understand how newborns sleep and how sleep patterns evolve in the early months of life. By sharing our knowledge with parents we can help them to have realistic expectations of an infant’s sleep pattern, and support them in encouraging helpful independent sleep associations, so that many sleep issues can be prevented.

Overview
The longest sleep period for infants in the first week of life is four hours, compared to over eight hours in the 16th week. Environmental as well as maturational effects influence this shift. Newborns have not yet developed their own internal circadian rhythms or the production of melatonin (Kennaway 1996) which help regulate sleep and makes you sleepy. Cortisol has a natural circadian rhythm that regulates waking and keeps you alert (Rivkees 2004), and cortisol is what helps infants sleep at night and be awake during the day. However, this pattern does not develop until infants are several months old.

Evidence points for Practice
1. In the early weeks sleep patterns are influenced by hunger, feeding, digesting and becoming hungry again, which is roughly every 2-3 hours.
2. Most babies don’t develop strong, hormonally-driven circadian rhythms until they are 12 weeks old, and some babies may take considerably longer (Jenni and Carskadon 2007, Jenni et al 2006).
3. Circadian rhythms help determine human sleep patterns and respond primarily to light and darkness in the environment. Light is the main cue influencing circadian rhythms which control patterns of sleep and waking, rest, activity, hunger, eating, hormones and fluctuations in body temperature.
4. The evidence suggests that social cues may have the greatest influence on newborn sleep patterns (Lorh et al. 1999), so helping newborns to adjust to daily routines and reducing light and stimulation at night is helpful.
5. Although there is some controversy around the issues of self-soothing (Weinraub et al. 2012) infants who can self-soothe and self-regulate appear to be able to resettle themselves back to sleep without signalling or requiring adult intervention (St James-Roberts. 2012). Parents can support this by encouraging their baby to learn how to self-settle from birth onwards.

Implications for Practice
- Reduce light, noise and social interaction at night time to create a difference between day and night and help regulate an infant’s body clock.
- Avoid feeding, cuddling or rocking a baby to sleep as this creates unhelpful sleep associations, instead encourage parents to settle a drowsy baby in their cot or Moses basket to promote self-settling.
- Once a baby is at least three weeks old, healthy and gaining weight normally, start to delay feeding for a few moments when the baby wakes at night. This short delay means that waking is not immediately rewarded by...
Evidence digest

feeding. Gradually do this, using nappy changing or handling to delay feeding. However, this should not involve leaving a baby to cry for a long time.

- Don’t immediately rush to pick up a fussing or crying infant but give them a few minutes to see if they can self-settle. Greater maternal sensitivity appears to be associated with increased infant awakening (St James-Roberts 2012 and Weinraub et all 2012).
- Encourage parents to involve the baby in their daily routines so these social cues can help acclimatise the baby to a 24 hour day.

References


Further recommended reading


What We Know About Normal Infant Sleeping Http://www.purplecrying.info/sections/index.php?sc=3&sctpg=8&


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