

## **Baby Sleep**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Don and Diane can't figure it out. Their first baby, Ellen, was a sleeper – slept five hours at a stretch, right out of the gate. Then came Baby Greg The Restless and they've had to up their caffeine intake to get through the day.

Don's theory: Baby Greg sleeps less because he is a boy. Boys are active.

But gender really has nothing to do with different sleep habits. When it comes to sleep, each baby is different.

While it is common for them to sleep 15 to 16 hours a day during their first four months, some sleep as little as 12 hours and others as much as 19 hours. Newborns may sleep three to five hours at a time, or much less. By four months, sleep patterns often stretch to peaceful eight-hour stints. But some four-month-olds sleep 12 hours at a time, while others only five hours.

And baby sleep can change. Infants who are sleepers today may not be snoozers tomorrow. About half of the babies who sleep through the night start waking in the middle of the night a few months later.

Sleep theories are popular among parents. Don's gender theory is a common one. Others include the season-of-the-year-dictates-if-baby-sleeps-through-the-night theory, and the you-need-to-fill-them-with-solids-before-bedtime theory. Armchair pediatrics is part of parenting. But it is important to know the facts.

Babies can't resist sleep when they're tired. They can't sleep when hungry. Those are the major forces that dictate sleep. "Sleep on demand" is a sound policy for parents to practice, because it makes sense and because any attempt to alter a baby's natural sleep pattern faces long odds.

Influencing a child's sleep pattern becomes a little easier after six months, when children begin to pass in and out of sleep in cycles. This often means waking in the middle of the night. Parents should be aware that most babies can fall back asleep on their own. Leaping to your child's every rustling, scooping the child out of bed, and waltzing the child to light jazz may set a precedent you won't want to continue.

Adopting a ritual that signals the approach of bedtime is helpful. Make it a calming activity, such as reading or soft singing. Kisses and reassurances are also in order. If you start a bedtime ritual early on, chances are you'll sleep better for it, and so will your child.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*