

ATTACHMENT (Module 5)

Lesson 2: Tears, communication and sleep

One of the most common questions we get asked in our 1-on-1 coaching is “Will my baby cry during the sleep training process?” And the answer is, “Most likely, yes!”. Tears are the main form of communication for a young child, and when things change, it can feel overwhelming, strange, confusing and emotional (for the parent as well as for the child!). However, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s bad.

Parents are often afraid of tears because of the widely spread misinformation that sleep training could cause RAD (reactive attachment disorder). While there have been studies which have shown that long-term neglect and long-term raised stress hormones has a very negative impact on a child’s psychology, lasting throughout adulthood, these studies were conducted in mass orphanages in Eastern Europe where children were left to cry unattended for hours on end. Not to mention that the trauma an orphan has already experienced by being separated from their mother is enough to cause them psychological damage. This is a VERY different setting than your home! These findings can in NO way be generalized to all crying. Attachment and your child’s well-being is of utmost importance to us, and because of this we strive to stay up to date with the most recent scientific research. We can reassure you, that to our current knowledge, there have been no studies which have proven that a short period of sleep training has any negative effects on the child or on the bond between parent and child.

In fact, some developmental psychologists today argue that NOT allowing your child to express emotions by rushing to silence their cry as soon as possible (and with any measures) can actually lead to negative outcomes (such as poor emotional regulation, trouble expressing emotions, unhealthy relationship to food when used as a calming tool, etc). This is because the parent isn’t attending to the actual need of the child, but rather postponing the crying or denying the expression of the emotion. Somewhere along the way, perhaps due to the misconstrual of the above-mentioned research,

many parents started to believe that they were a failure if their little one cried, or that their child would be psychologically damaged if they cried for an extended period of time. And so crying became almost a taboo. However, crying is not only a form of communication, but is an expression of emotion, and has even been shown to have a healing effect when it happens in a familiar and safe environment. Crying does not necessarily indicate that a need is not being met, but simply indicates that your child is frustrated with the current situation.

Some people mistakenly claim that babies stop crying during sleep training because they have “given up”, not because they have learned to sleep better. This misconception is based on a study where babies aged 4-10 months were sleep trained and their cortisol (stress hormone) levels measured over 3 days. Their crying decreased, but their cortisol levels stayed high. This statistic is unfortunately very misleading. **Firstly, overtired children struggling with sleep issues experience raised levels of stress hormones on the daily.** Three days is too short of a period for the overtiredness to subside and to accurately measure how much the sleep training itself affects stress levels. Secondly, if babies truly became helpless and “shut-down” as a result of sleep training, they would never call out or signal for help at night again, or during the day for that matter - yet, this is obviously never the case!

A sleep-trained child will still have occasional wake-ups due to a runny nose, teething pain, being cold, etc and they may develop night wakings due to sleep regressions or developmental leaps and they will always call out to mommy and daddy when that happens. If it was really true that sleep training destroys attachment and makes a child “give up”, then children who have gone through sleep training would never call out to their parents in the night. But this is not the case! In fact, oftentimes, we have to work on encouraging good sleep habits multiple times during the first 2-3 years of a child’s life because all the before-mentioned circumstances can cause regressions in your child’s sleep habits that may not subside on their own.