

## ATTACHMENT (Module 5)

### *Lesson 3: "Self-settling" and "self-soothing"*

One thing that causes a lot of confusion for parents regarding attachment and sleep is the difference between how psychologists and sleep scientists use the terms "self-settling" and/or "self-soothing". In psychology, "self-soothing" or "self-settling" usually refers to **"the ability to self-regulate emotions."** It is generally understood that this ability to "self-regulate emotions" starts to develop in the first months of life, but is not completely developed until adulthood.

However, the terms "self-settling" or "self-soothing" were first used in the context of sleep when a sleep scientist was referring to...

**"The ability your child has to independently fall asleep, and put themselves back to sleep when they go through light sleep phases."**

This was a breakthrough moment in sleep science, as researchers realized that when babies slept, they weren't actually just "asleep", but they (and every other human!) were cycling through the various sleep stages, arousing slightly between sleep cycles - some babies were simply able to fall back to sleep independently, in comparison to some babies, who couldn't. **They then discovered that the babies who were able to fall asleep without much external help were also more likely to connect their sleep cycles during the night without help.**

We often hear the accusation that "babies should not be sleep trained to independently **self-settle** to sleep (meaning to fall asleep independently) because they are emotionally immature and not physically able to **self-settle** (meaning to regulate their emotions)." This confusing use of the same term in different ways often leads to any form of sleep training getting a bad rap, because many people assume that sleep training involves forcing a child to sleep in a certain way, regardless of their developmental, emotional and biological needs.

**However, in reality, provided with the right conditions, every baby is born with the ability to fall asleep!** We as humans are physiologically made to rest, to sleep, to restore our energy. Some babies find this process of settling easier than others, but ALL babies have an innate ability to fall asleep, from the moment they are born - they don't need anyone to teach them physiologically HOW to sleep.

**When we refer to encouraging "self-settling" through sleep training we think about how we can make the process of falling asleep as easy as possible for the child.** We can do that by making sure they aren't overtired, are placed in a sleep conducive environment, are well-fed and feel safe in their bed.

**On the other hand, we acknowledge that babies and toddlers ARE emotionally immature and may not be able to regulate their emotions on their own.** In all the methods and suggestions we use, we always want to make sure that your child knows you are there for them to support them and give them security, and to help them co-regulate their emotions when they're upset during the sleep training process. Changing engrained sleep patterns and habits will most likely cause some frustration, but just because our little ones need some reassurance to calm down from heightened emotions, does not mean that they are physiologically incapable of falling asleep independently.

**It can be helpful to keep in mind that you've actually been "sleep training" your child every time you put them to sleep since they were born, whether you were aware of it or not!** The way we as parents approach sleep teaches our child what to expect when it comes to bedtime. If we always rock them to sleep, this is how they know how to fall asleep. If they are encouraged to self-settle in bed with the comforting presence of a parent nearby, that's the habit they will learn. As our every action and expectation shapes our child's habits both in the short and long-term, we can be mindful of the messages we are sending and the patterns we are teaching them, and make adjustments when necessary.