

SLEEP ASSOCIATIONS (Module 6)

Lesson 1: What is a sleep association?

Generally speaking, a “sleep association” is anything that your child connects with sleep, usually an event or thing which directly precedes your little one drifting into sleepyland. These associations can either hinder or help your little one fall asleep and/or connect their sleep cycles during sleep.

The reason that the way your child falls asleep is important is because it is also the way they will expect to re-settle to sleep during light sleep stages. No child is capable of sleeping through the night without waking up at all (even we as adults don't do this!) All children cycle through light and deep sleep multiple times a night. If a child is not capable of replicating the way they fell asleep by themselves, they will have a much harder time re-settling to sleep when they lightly awaken in the middle of a nap or at night. So, sleep associations aren't inherently bad, but they are important, and whether they are helpful or unhelpful boils down to if they work for or against consolidated sleep.

Positive or helpful sleep associations either help your child fall asleep or protect their sleep. These are either constant during sleep or something the child can recreate on their own when they awaken between sleep cycles. Examples of positive sleep associations are constant white noise, which protects your little one's sleep from outside noises, and sleeping in a sleep sack, which becomes a non-verbal cue for sleep as well as keeps your child warm at night.

Negative or unhelpful sleep associations are those that children need for settling, but cannot recreate on their own, and which mean they are often unable to move from one sleep cycle to the next without your assistance. The most common unhelpful sleep associations are feeding to sleep (after newborn age), rocking/bouncing to sleep or using a dummy (unless they can find and replace it themselves). Anything

that takes place in the last few minutes before sleep where you are somewhat involved can be connected to the process of how the child falls asleep, and that means it may be a sleep association that is hindering long naps and consolidated night sleep.

If your little one is affected by unhelpful sleep associations, the key is to change the pattern by using a new but consistent settling method. This is the process often referred to as “sleep training”, and the main aim is to practice your child settling to sleep with only helpful sleep associations, which will support better sleep. Changing patterns of behavior is undoubtedly often the hardest part of the whole process - change is never easy, and there are usually some tears involved! However, this is also why we look at all the other sleep factors like physiology, development, day routine and sleep environment first, so that in laying a good foundation, we can keep tears to a minimum! Remember, you are training your child every time you put them to sleep, whether you're aware of it or not because the way we approach sleep is teaching our child what to expect when it comes to bedtime.

The way you can change the sleep associations that your child has developed is by implementing a **settling method**, which will help your child develop new sleep habits so they are able to self-settle. We'll go into more detail about settling methods in the next module, but first let's look at how you can evaluate whether or not your child has a sleep association.