

SLEEP ASSOCIATIONS (Module 6)

Lesson 2: Evaluating your child's sleep associations

So, how do you know if your child has a sleep association? The main question to ask yourself is : is the way my child falls asleep, and the sleep environment where they fall asleep in, exactly the same as when they wake up in the middle of the night or in the middle of a nap? If not, they probably have a sleep association!

One thing to keep in mind as you look closer at the sleep associations we'll describe next, is that your child may have more than one and use different sleep aids for different situations. For example, they may fall asleep in the stroller during the day and connect their sleep cycles with movement, need only their pacifier to settle to sleep in the evening, but then need you to nurse them back to sleep multiple times at night. In this case, your child has a sleep association with movement, pacifier and nursing to sleep and you would need to wean all 3 in order to get your little one sleeping as best as they are able to at this age.

Let's have a more detailed look at the most common sleep associations which negatively impact sleep.

Lesson 2.1 - Pacifier

If your child has a pacifier, but doesn't struggle with cat-napping, falling asleep or frequent night waking, then it is likely not an issue. This is usually the case when a child has figured out how to find and replace the pacifier on their own, and does not need or request parental assistance to do so.

Your little one most likely has an unhelpful sleep association with the pacifier...

- If they can't fall asleep without the pacifier, even if it falls out shortly afterwards
- If they struggle with cat-napping and/or wake up frequently at night

- If they are not able to find and replace the pacifier on their own, or do not do this regularly during sleep-time and require your assistance every time they wake up, even if they can replace their pacifier during the day when awake

If this sounds like your child, you will need to address the pacifier in your sleep plan, whether it be through weaning your child from the pacifier OR re-thinking pacifier use, depending on their age and your parental preferences.

If your child hasn't had a pacifier before now, we would not recommend that you introduce one, as this could actually backfire and make the sleep even worse. Lots of parents hope to solve sleep issues by giving the child a pacifier to help stop them from crying when weaning off of another sleep association, what they are really doing is simply creating a new one.

We'll discuss how to wean the pacifier OR teach the skill of find and replace in Module 8, but for now, here are a few age specific tips on pacifier usage.

Pacifier use: 4-6 months

While a pacifier can be a helpful tool for fussy newborns, especially those with colic or reflux, falling asleep with the pacifier can turn into an unhelpful sleep association around 3-4 months of age. This can cause short naps and frequent night wake-ups, especially after the 4-month sleep regression. Babies don't have the hand-coordination to replace their pacifier at this age, so they need parents to put the pacifier back every time they awaken in the night.

This is why we recommend weaning the pacifier as a sleep association between 3-6 months of age. Yes there will be some crying involved, but it will actually be easier than weaning the pacifier further down the road when your baby has developed an emotional attachment to it! If you wish to keep the pacifier at this age, it may not be possible to improve your baby's sleep much until your little one learns to find and replace the pacifier in the middle of the night (this usually happens between 9-12

months).

Pacifier use: 7-9 months

At this age, your baby may be a bit more attached to the pacifier than when they were little, but it is still quite easy to wean the pacifier if you wish to do so, especially if your baby hasn't experienced strong separation anxiety yet. Babies often don't have the hand-eye-coordination yet to replace their pacifier at this age, so they often need parents to put the pacifier back every time they go through a light sleep phase in the night (which could be every 1-3 hours), which is why we recommend you wean the pacifier as a sleep association at this age.

However, if you are confident that your child is able to find and replace their pacifier during the night, you can choose to try and teach them to do that instead of weaning it.

Pacifier use: 10-24 months

At this age, many children go through phases of stronger separation anxiety, and become quite emotionally attached to their pacifiers. We don't recommend you introduce a new pacifier habit at this age, but if your child already has one, and it is not obviously disturbing sleep, we suggest you wait until you are able to communicate with your child and let them be part of the decision, at least regarding how to get rid of the pacifier, before weaning it completely. Trying to help your child learn the skill of finding and replacing the pacifier on their own may be the best option at this age (check out Lesson 6 of Module 8 for more information).

Most pediatric dentists do suggest removing pacifiers at the latest by 2-2.5 years of age, so that it doesn't affect jaw development, and some parents even find that their children suffer from more ear infections if they use a pacifier beyond age 1. At this age, we suggest the pacifier is used ONLY for sleep time and not during the day for comfort (putting the pacifier away in a special place where your toddler can't get it often helps).

This encourages healthy teeth and speech development.

Lesson 2.2 - Rocking or movement

When a child falls asleep with movement they will often wake up after one sleep cycle, especially if the motion has stopped, or if they are in a different sleep environment than when they first fell asleep (ie. if they fall asleep rocked in parents arms, and then are put into the crib asleep). This often results in catnapping and frequent wake-ups in the night. Plus, as we already mentioned in the module on Physiology, as your little one gets older, sleep with movement can contribute to overtiredness, as some babies aren't able to get into a deep sleep during movement and therefore the nap will be less restorative than a nap in the crib, even if the quantity of sleep is age-appropriate.

Your little one most likely has an unhelpful sleep association with movement if they can only fall asleep while...

- *rocking in arms, in a hammock / infant swing, or baby carrier*
- *in the stroller or car seat*

and struggles with one or more of the following...

- *catnapping*
- *difficulty falling asleep at naps, bedtime and upon waking early in the morning*
- *and frequent night wake ups.*

We'll discuss how to help your child fall asleep without movement in Modules 7 and 8.

Lesson 2.3 - Feeding to sleep, or just before sleep

Feeding to sleep works really well for newborns, but as your child gets older, it can become the main cause of their sleep troubles. Even if your little one is not actually falling asleep while feeding, if the feed is too close to sleep time or the feed takes place in their bed, it can still be a sleep association.

Your little one most likely has an unhelpful sleep association with feeding / sucking if they...

- *feed to sleep*
- *OR finish a milk-feed within 15 minutes of being put to sleep at naptime or bedtime*

and struggle with one or more of the following...

- *catnapping*
- *difficulty falling asleep at naps, bedtime and upon waking early in the morning*
- *and frequent night wake ups.*

We'll give you specific tips on how to wean from the feed/suck-to-sleep association in Modules 7 and 8.

Lesson 2.4 - Parental presence in the room

This sleep association comes often as a surprise to parents - isn't your presence supposed to be calming and help your child fall asleep better?! In one way, yes this might be true. However, after 4 months of age, babies become more aware of their environment. If mom or dad is present while they are falling asleep, children will often catnap and wake frequently in the night looking for parental presence to be able to fall back asleep. Many older babies and toddlers have major trouble falling asleep with mom and dad present, leading to prolonged bedtime and overtiredness. This could be because they know you will leave as soon as they fall asleep, or because they want to spend more time with you. All we know is that once your little one gets used to falling asleep on their own, they will settle more quickly and easily.

Your little one most likely has an unhelpful sleep association with parental presence if they...

- *need a parent or caregiver to be in the room in order to fall asleep*

and struggle with one or more of the following...

- *catnapping*
- *wake up frequently in the night, seemingly needing to check where you are*
- *difficulty falling asleep at naps and bedtime*

- *early morning waking*
- *and frequent night wake ups.*

We'll discuss how to help your child fall asleep without your presence in Modules 7 and 8.