

SLEEP ASSOCIATIONS (Module 6)

Lesson 3: Hidden Sleep Associations

Sometimes unhelpful sleep associations may not be obvious at first, and although it seems that your child is falling asleep independently, their naps or night sleep is struggling to improve. This is often due to what we refer to as a “hidden sleep association”.

For example, your child may actually still have a feeding to sleep association if they feed too close to sleep time, even if they don't fall asleep while actually feeding. Making sure your little one finishes their last milk feed 20 minutes before putting your little one into bed can help avoid this.

Similarly, if you stay in the room too long after putting your child in bed at the end of your bedtime ritual, and you leave as they doze off or just after, your presence is most likely still the hidden sleep association at play. Here it's important to keep in mind that your child shouldn't be startled by any changes in the sleep environment throughout the night. If they think you are in the room as they fall asleep, and then wake up and you're not there, they may signal and call out to check where you are. The best way to resolve this is to confidently leave the room straight after putting your child into their bed for sleep time. That ensures that your child is awake and aware that you are leaving the room, and that there are no surprises which could disturb their sleep in the middle of the night.

Sometimes a child will seem like they need parental help to keep them in the sleeping position, with the parent constantly actively laying them down every time when they sit or stand in bed or rolling them back on their back when your baby first learns how to sleep on their tummy. Although the child may appear to not be capable of doing this skill on their own, it's most likely a “learned” helplessness - if you've always helped them do this, they will have learned over time that you are

responsible for helping them down from sitting or standing in bed. This is then subconsciously a way that your child engages your attention and interaction at sleep time, which acts as a hidden sleep association.

Firstly, in this scenario, we suggest you give your child lots of space to practice this skill during the day when they're awake. The more confidently they can sit down from a standing position, or lay down from sitting during the day on their own when they are having fun, the easier it will be for them to do this behavior at night. They build muscle memory and the movement becomes second nature. Secondly, we encourage you to avoid helping your child to a lying position in bed as much as possible once your child is able to sit or stand on their own. Rather, try communicating with your words and actions what you want the child to do (e.g. pat the mattress while saying "Time to lay down for sleep now.") They may need assistance once or twice, and if you do give a bit of help, make sure you use natural movements - first assist your child to a sitting position, then help them lay down. However, after one or two assists, it's fine for you to trust them to figure it out! If your little one is capable of getting themselves to sitting or standing, they are definitely capable of learning how to lay down on their own!