

SLEEP TRAINING PROCESS (Module 8)

Lesson 2: Sleep Training Process

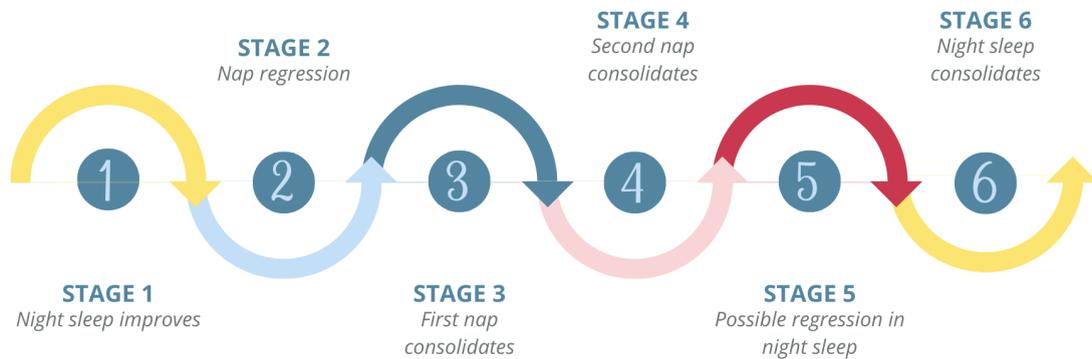
Keeping realistic expectations

Knowing what to expect from the sleep training process can help you have realistic expectations and to more calmly ride out the bumps along the way that will inevitably come. Look at the graph below this audio. As you can see, once you start with sleep training, there is a normal cycle of ups and downs that we expect to see - it actually often gets a little worse before it gets better!

Most children start at stage 1, so you will see an improvement in their night sleep. They will start connecting their sleep cycles more easily, with fewer interventions from you, OR sleep longer stretches at once. After this we often see a regression in naps, meaning your child might protest more at the beginning of naps and/or struggle to do a longer nap, even if they previously could do so. After a few days, you should see the first nap start to get easier once you get to stage 3. Then usually the second nap improves, but that might be followed by a regression in night sleep. So as days get easier, there might be a setback at night. After this, though, night sleep should start to consolidate again and both day and night sleep patterns start to stabilize.

Some children will start at later stages, depending on their sleep issues, so you might find that day sleep improves before night sleep and you follow from there. We usually see the whole process take 2-3 weeks on average, but could be shorter or longer depending on your child's sleep associations, your chosen settling method, and other factors.

SLEEP TRAINING PROCESS



Extinction Burst & Intermittent Reinforcement

One setback that we see with almost every child (and that is the lead cause of parents giving up on sleep training) is what psychologists call an “extinction burst”. First, what do we mean by “extinction?” Whenever we want to change a person’s behavior (child or adult), we need to first understand what is sustaining or reinforcing this behavior.

For example, say you rock your baby back to sleep every time they wake up and cry out in the night. In this case, the rocking is reinforcing the wake-ups. When we want to encourage the baby to connect their sleep cycles without rocking, we have to change your reaction to their crying. This is where the settling method comes in. Essentially, we take away the “reward” or outcome of being rocked and substitute it with the settling method to change the behavior. Eventually, your baby will learn to fall back asleep on their own rather than cry out to be rocked (unless they really need something). This is called “extinction”.

The key to extinction is consistency. Even if you give your child the reward (whatever that reaction is that they expect from you) or reinforce their behavior only occasionally, the behavior will continue. In fact, that kind of inconsistency is called **intermittent**

reinforcement, and it's the most effective way to reinforce a behavioral pattern because the child is not sure WHEN the reward will come, but they have learned, that sometimes it does, so they keep trying in the hopes that this time they will succeed.

What happens after we stop reinforcing a certain behavior (such as feeding or rocking to sleep), is that initially, the child will protest the change, but some may adapt quickly to the settling method and you'll see improvements within the first couple of days. However, as soon as the child begins to comprehend that they're not being given the reward consistently, they will start doing the behavior (crying) even more, in order to get the reward.

That might mean that the baby will cry louder and/or for longer. They may start protesting already during the sleep ritual, because they know what's to follow. In most cases, the extinction burst happens on day 3-4 (sometimes starting already on day 2), but this may vary slightly depending on your situation. Also, there may be several extinction bursts. In fact, when weaning several sleep associations one by one, you can expect an extinction burst after weaning each sleep association. It is crucial that you stay consistent during the extinction burst! If we give in here during the "extinction burst" and rock to sleep again, as in the above example, the baby will have learned an awful truth: "I guess I just have to cry longer or louder in order to get what I want." This will lead to more crying in the next few days and mean that improving sleep will take much longer.

This extinction burst is a universal phenomenon that happens with any kind of behavioral change, whether it be related to sleep or screens or sweets after dinner. Therefore, it can happen with any sleep training method regardless of how gentle the approach is. The only way to get through the extinction burst is to stay consistent.