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A good night's sleep for baby

A 6 month old is put down at 6:30 p.m. each evening and awakens at 11:30 p.m. for a feeding. The infant sings, coos, and vocalizes for an hour before falling back to sleep. Parents question whether this behavior is normal and wonder whether the baby will outgrow it.

The simple answer to both is yes. But, other things do come into play.

Parental concerns regarding sleep issues are universal, and anxieties related to infant bedtime struggles and night time awakening is reported in one-third of all families. It is important that parents understand that there is a broad range of normal behavior and that the norm changes dramatically as infants move through developmental stages.

Nighttime awakening is natural for both infants and adults as they pass through a number of sleep cycles every night, moving into very deep sleep for the first two or three hours before the cycling between lighter (dreaming) sleep and deeper sleep begins. It is normal to awaken during these periods of light sleep.

The 6 month old who settles easily when put down for the night and amuses himself when he awakens will often surprise mom and dad a few months later with tears at bedtime and fussiness during the night, as transitions to sleep become an issue. While this behavior is common, all parents worry that something is wrong--perhaps a fever, an infection, or an undiagnosed pain or illness? While these are questions parents should consider, in general, the behavior change is the beginning of a new developmental stage.

Between six and twelve months of age, infants develop, what psychologists call, "object permanence." Previously, a favorite toy that was out of sight was out of mind. At this age, babies have learned that the toy exists, even when she can't see it, and will search and cry until they have it. They have also learned that those nice people who feed, cuddle, change, and play with them are somewhere when they're not with them. Knowing this makes them anxious,

even angry, because they are alone and want company.

Armed with the knowledge that this behavioral change is normal and expected, a parent can contain the situation while avoiding guilt and anxiety. In many cases, the baby is already over stimulated and will benefit more from the calming presence of a quiet mom or dad than from the food, drink, bright lights, or play that reward and encourage fussy behavior.

Since infants thrive in a consistent, structured environment, parents can encourage healthy infant sleep habits by maintaining a consistent schedule. Cuddle or rock the baby before bed, but put him down while he is still awake. This will allow him to learn how to settle himself by sucking a thumb or playing with a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. Parents may stay in the room, without making eye contact, while the infant settles down. After a few minutes the touch of a parent's hand may also help the baby settle.

When infants wake up at night, a parent's presence can be reassuring, but avoid the over-stimulation caused by turning on the lights or feeding. Babies over the age of 6 months do not awaken in the night because they are hungry; holding and cuddling fussy, uncomfortable infants will not spoil them.

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