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For infant sleep, receptiveness more important than routine

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Parents understand the challenge of getting infants to sleep through the night, and now Penn State researchers show that being emotionally receptive can reduce sleep disruptions and help infants and toddlers sleep better.

"Bed time can be a very emotional time. It heralds the longest separation of the day for most infants," said Douglas Teti, professor of human development and family studies. "It struck me that going to sleep, and sleeping well, is much easier for some young children than others, and I wanted to assess what factored into this, and what parents and children contribute to sleep patterns."

In the study, which examined mothers' behaviors during infants' bedtimes, parents had the most success with their children's sleep when they responded appropriately to their children's cues. These include showing disinterest in an activity or simply glancing inquisitively at a parent. For example, one mother in the study talked quietly and gently to her 6-month-old infant while breastfeeding.

"She continuously gazed at the infant's face and, whenever the infant vocalized, she responded promptly (e.g., 'It's OK.')," the authors report in a recent issue of the *Journal of* Family Psychology.

In contrast, a different mother in the study "used stern directives with her 24-month-old during book-reading whenever the child got up out of bed," and "continually attempted to engage the child in the book despite

clear signs that the child was losing interest (e.g., child was fidgety and continually turned his attention elsewhere)," the authors note. The result: "the child got up and left the room four times before he eventually fell asleep."

When parents provide reassurance through emotional communication, Teti and his colleagues believe that it lets children know they are in a safe environment.

"Emotions are the most basic form of communication between babies and parents," Teti said.

His findings pose new challenges to parents because they suggest that being emotionally available -- paying attention to cues and responding to children appropriately -- is more effective than a specific bedtime behavior in promoting better sleep.

The researchers found no significant relation between sleep disruptions and the amount of time parents spent in close contact with infants or involved in quiet activities before bedtime. This contradicts past research, which had suggested that prolonged close physical contact with a parent undermines babies' ability to sleep on their own.

This study was one of the first to use direct observation of infant sleep patterns, and is the first to use multiple video cameras in the infants' and parents' bedrooms to capture parent-infant interactions at night.

"Sleep is a context about which we know little," said Teti. "It can be a very emotionally charged period for parents and babies. Looking at parent-child interactions in this context could be more telling for childhood outcomes than what you see in a more structured daytime play session." Many existing studies of parenting have focused on controlled play environments, in which researchers have studied parent-child

interactions and emotions.

Teti's study, SIESTA I (Study of Infants' Emergent Sleep TrAjectories) looked at data from 35 families, and he sees very similar results in an ongoing longitudinal study, SIESTA II, which is a more in-depth analysis of factors promoting infant sleep as infants age, from 1 to 24 months. SIESTA II is funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

One of the next steps will be to examine links between infants' temperamental styles, parenting at bedtime and during the night, sleep disruptions, and development, according to Teti.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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