

How to stay sane when your child can't sleep

June 26 2017

Your child's sleep problems may be making you depressed and unsure of your parenting skills, says a new paper by UBC sleep expert and nursing professor Wendy Hall. The good news is you can turn the situation around. In this Q&A, she talks about the connection between parental sanity and infant sleep—and offers a few suggestions for parents unsure of the way forward.

What prompted you to focus on parents' mental state for this particular study?

Researchers already have a good understanding of how poor [sleep](#) can affect children's growth and development. We have a fairly good idea how [parental depression](#) can negatively impact children's development and parental attachment. But we know less about how kids' sleep can affect their [parents'](#) mental health. This study is one of the first to look at that connection.

What did you find?

We recruited 253 families from B.C. with [infants](#) who were having trouble sleeping, and ruled out parents diagnosed with or currently experiencing clinical depression.

The families were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group received sleep intervention for their child in the form of information about infant sleep and how to solve infant sleep problems, with support from public health nurses. The second only received basic infant safety

information packages. We rated the parents' depression scores at the outset, and at six and 24 weeks after the intervention.

We found a correlation between thoughts about their infant's sleep and parental depression, even after making allowances for parental fatigue or [poor sleep](#). In other words, parents who worried that they could not manage their children's sleep were more likely to have higher levels of depression. That was true for both mothers and fathers.

The situation improved after the intervention, notably by the 24-week mark. Once the [infant sleep](#) problem was treated, parental depression lifted significantly. There was a reduction of almost 30 per cent of mothers and 20 per cent of fathers reporting high depression scores.

What does this mean for parents and health care professionals?

It tells us that we should listen carefully to parents of young infants, to recognize signs of [depression](#) associated with doubts about helping infants sleep that are beyond parental fatigue or lack of sleep.

It also highlights how sleep interventions can benefit both child and parent. If you can find a way to regulate your child's sleep, your own state of mind and self-confidence get a boost. Talking to a health professional can help. If that's not easily accessible, UBC has posted one of my [public talks](#) on YouTube that could help in understanding children's sleep.

More information: Wendy A. Hall et al, Relationships between parental sleep quality, fatigue, cognitions about infant sleep, and parental depression pre and post-intervention for infant behavioral sleep problems, *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* (2017). [DOI:](#)

[10.1186/s12884-017-1284-x](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-017-1284-x)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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