

How you help a child go to sleep is related to their behavioral development, finds new study

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A group of international researchers has examined parental methods to help toddlers sleep across 14 cultures and found that these methods are related to the development of a child's temperament. The researchers suggested focusing on better sleep-related parenting practices to support positive behavioral development across cultures.

The importance of good sleep during childhood development has been extensively researched. Bad sleep quality and behaviors are detrimental to neurobehavioral functioning, emotional reactivity and regulation, and can pose a risk for future psychopathology.

"Parental sleeping techniques are correlated with children's sleep quality, and the importance of cultural context in [child development](#) has been long recognized," said corresponding author Christie Pham, of Washington State University. "We wanted to examine whether cross-cultural differences in parental sleep-supporting strategies account for differences in toddler temperament."

In a study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Pham and her colleagues studied the effect of different parental sleep-supporting techniques on child temperament across 14 cultures. They hypothesized that passive ways of helping a child fall asleep (e.g., cuddling, singing, and reading), but not active methods (e.g., walking, car rides, and playing), would be positively related to a child's temperament.

Child temperament

Child temperament is defined as the way children regulate their behavior and handle their emotions. Different child temperaments can have effects on a child's mental and physical well-being and can pose a risk for future disorders. Researchers define temperament by three overarching factors:

1. Surgency (SUR), which reflects positive affect such as smiling and laughter, approach tendencies, activity, and enthusiasm.
2. Negative Emotionality (NE), which captures overall distress proneness, including in situations eliciting fear, anger, sadness, and discomfort.
3. Effortful Control (EC), involving attention-based regulatory skills and enjoyment of calm activities.

Each of the factors independently contributes to predicting behavioral, achievement, and interpersonal outcomes, such as behavior problems, social competence, and academic performance.

The international group of researchers asked 841 caregivers across 14 cultures (Belgium, Brazil, Chile, China, Finland, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Spain, South Korea, Turkey, and the US) to complete an early childhood [behavior](#) questionnaire and a daily activities questionnaire. They were asked to report on their toddlers' (between 17 and 40 months of age, 52% male) temperament and their sleep-supporting parenting techniques, respectively.

"Utilizing linear multilevel regression models and group-mean centering procedures, we assessed the role of between- and within-cultural variance in sleep-supporting practices in relation to temperament," explained Pham.

Active vs. passive sleep support

They found that differences in sleep-supporting methods between cultures and within the same culture were associated with different temperament characteristics. The difference was larger between cultures, meaning that sleeping methods independently contribute to differences in child temperament across cultures.

"Our study shows that a parent's sleep-supporting techniques are substantially associated with their child's temperament traits across cultures, potentially impacting their development," said Pham. "For example, countries with greater reliance on passive strategies had toddlers with higher sociability scores (higher SUR)."

On the other hand, fussy or difficult temperament (higher NE) was significantly correlated with active sleep techniques.

Overall, passive sleep-supporting techniques were associated with lower NE and higher SUR at the culture level and higher EC at the individual level. Active sleep-supporting techniques were associated with higher NE at an individual level only.

Rank-ordering the extent to which a [culture](#)'s sample endorsed using passive techniques, the results show that the U.S., Finland, and Netherlands top the list and South Korea, Turkey, and China are at the bottom of this distribution. In contrast, rank-ordering for active techniques, the researchers find that Romania, Spain, and Chile top the list while Turkey, Italy, and Belgium are at the bottom of the distribution.

"Our results demonstrate the importance of sleep promotion and suggest that parental [sleep](#) practices could be potential targets for interventions to mitigate risk posed by challenging [temperament](#) profiles across cultures," concluded Pham.

More information: Christie Pham et al, Relations between bedtime parenting behaviors and temperament across 14 cultures, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1004082](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1004082).
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