

# Books on toddler sleep can give inflexible advice—parents should be reassured that one size doesn't fit all

November 1 2023, by Alexandra Scherer

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If you are a parent of a young child, sleep may well have become an obsession for you.

Toddlers often wake frequently during the night. Sleep deprivation is a [real problem](#) for parents. And parents are often asked—and judged—about how their [child](#) is sleeping.

It's no wonder that there is a healthy industry providing parents with [books](#) of advice on how to get their children to [sleep](#) for longer. But these books also often offer contradictory advice.

In [research](#) with my colleague Amanda Norman, I examined parenting "self-help" books aimed at parents with children aged between two and five. We looked at how parenting books address parents—and how books like this [made us feel](#) as parents ourselves.

We found each of the books tended to give parents one approach for dealing with their child's sleep, rather than a range of options. But these methods were polarized between [gentle parenting](#), which focused on following the needs of the child, and "behaviorist" techniques that reward desired behavior and prioritize routine.

In our own parenting experiences, gentle approaches felt vague and left us unclear of a path forward. The behaviorist methods made us feel like failures because the advice was so rigid it made it hard to follow well.

## **Instructing parents**

Books about children's sleep often take an authoritative or moralizing tone with parents: an expert telling them what to do rather than a peer discussing ideas to try to help with their children's sleep. We found these in both behaviorist and gentle parenting approaches.

A routine-driven, behaviorist approach, such as that taken in psychologist Tanya Byron's 2008 [Your Toddler](#), lays out how to respond to a child's behavior to get them to sleep through the night in their own bed. The book recommends that children who sleep through the night—the approved behavior—should be rewarded, for example with a sticker.

In [New Toddler Taming](#) (2011) a book which also takes a behaviorist approach, pediatrician Christopher Green suggests use of his "patent rope trick" to keep children in their bedrooms, though noting that "to some, if not most, parents it's going to seem a little bit old-fashioned and a fair bit silly":

"Take a length of rope and loop one end around the inner handle of the toddler's bedroom door. Attach the other end to the outer handle of a nearby door. Carefully adjust the rope so that when the bedroom door is pulled open, the aperture is a little less than the diameter of the offending child's head. As all of you who have had babies know, if the head is not going to get out, nothing is. The result is that the toddler is not locked in, they just cannot get out."

He adds that a light should be left on outside the bedroom, so the child will not become frightened, yet at the same time the child is "very aware that bed is the place he is meant to be. He may resort to crying to break your resolve but once again this ploy will fail when you use the rope trick in conjunction with the controlled crying technique."

Gina Ford, a former maternity nurse and author of bestselling infant sleep books, also takes a behaviorist approach in her book [The Contented Toddler Years](#). This includes briefly comforting a crying child before putting them back in their cot or bed. But the assertion that this is unlikely to be necessary more than once or twice before the child goes to sleep can seem improbable when faced with a living, breathing

toddler.

American pediatrician [William Sears'](#) book *Nighttime Parenting: How to Get Your Baby and Child to Sleep* takes a gentle parenting approach. Sears argues for a "lazy" method that meets a baby's needs while also preserving the parents' own sleep by sharing a bed.

Co-sleeping—children sleeping in the same bed as their parent—means that parents can meet their child's needs during the night as they would be met during the day, by connecting with them and offering cuddles and being emotionally available. This approach, however, may not be particularly helpful to parents who struggle to get enough sleep when sharing a bed with a child, or who feel they need some time alone.

Constant availability from a parent—maintaining the "powerful biological connection between you and your baby"—is also recommended in [Pinky McKay's](#) 2006 gentle parenting book [Sleeping Like a Baby](#). This advice comes alongside examples of the negative results of not responding to infant wakes for children later in life. In one quote, a mother says, "I feel devastated that I have betrayed my child."

[Other research](#) that has looked at how mothering has changed since the end of the second world war found that overly strict advice often resulted in mothers feeling ambivalent about parenting books from "experts."

This was our experience as parents. Our own feelings and experiences with managing—or failing to manage—sleep were very much entwined in the reading process. We tried to implement advice from parenting books, failed, and then found our own ways through.

As researchers, we also found that there was little space given in these books for individual contexts, such as the baby or parent's temperament,

or factors such as ethnicity, [social class](#), or additional needs such as neurodiversity. There was no mention of the views of the children themselves.

The management of children's sleep was treated as an issue with a one-size-fits-all solution. But [children](#)—and their [parents](#)—are individuals with their own needs. The blueprints offered in books offering advice on improving baby sleep should be read with caution; we cannot make a child sleep.

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