

No Sleep Training Required

Written by Zelma Tolley

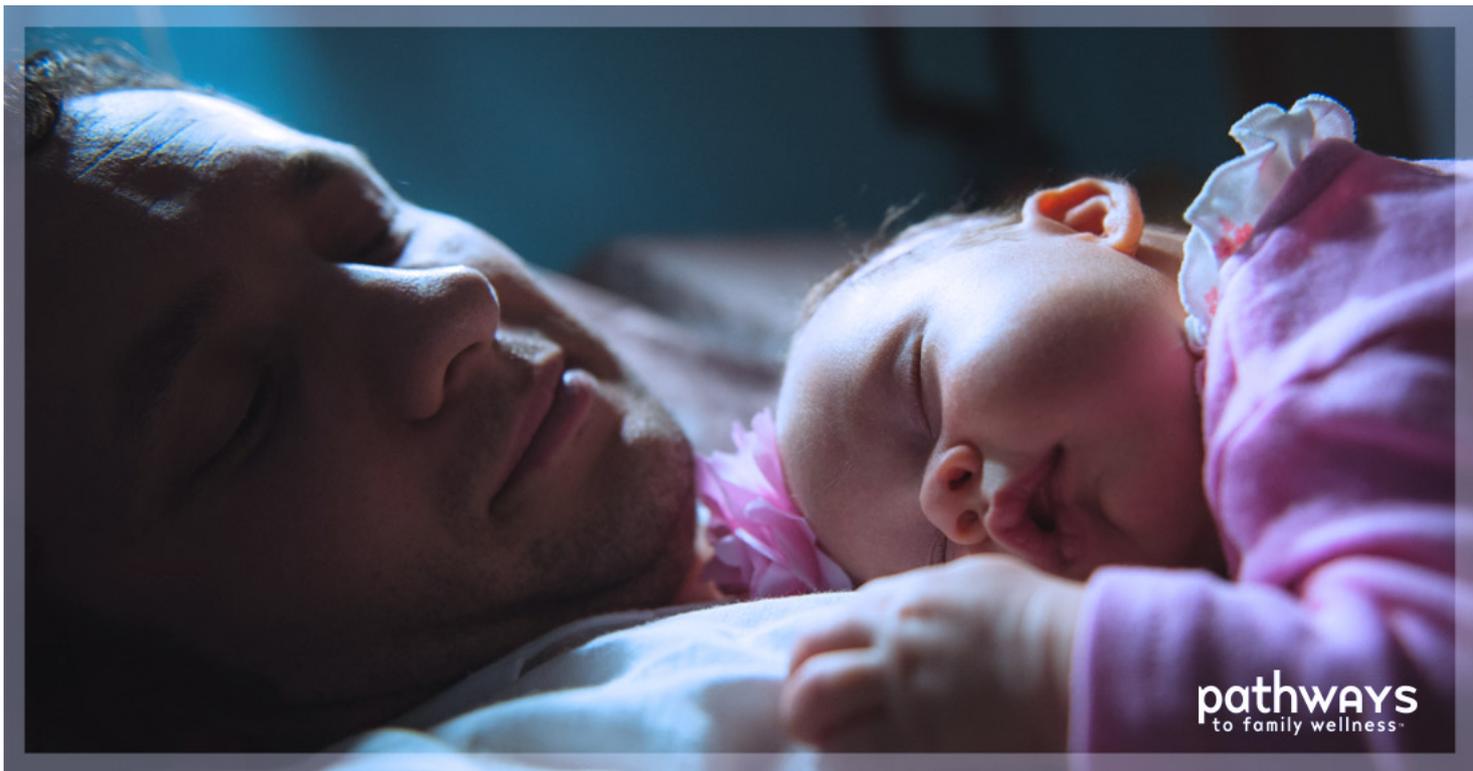
Friday, 01 March 2019 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 21 July 2019 12:17

How to Achieve Radical Acceptance of Biologically Normal Infant Sleep

Sleep is usually a concern for parents for a variety of reasons. Most of these are fueled by unnecessary fear.

It is so important to support parents as they understand and cope with the realities of biologically normal infant sleep. I write about this a lot.

Often, I imagine people read these pieces and picture a woman on the couch with her cup of tea, her babe peacefully asleep in her own bed, in a tastefully decorated room where she will stay all night.



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“What does she know?” readers would ask. “She couldn’t possibly imagine what I’m going through right now.”

The true image is a lot closer to the reality for many parents. I’m writing this on my phone with the brightness dimmed, in bed, with my baby on the breast. I am practicing acceptance of this time for the way that it is. I use the word “practice” mindfully, because even with all the education in the world, our society isn’t set up to support biologically normal infant sleep. This makes it easy to get caught up in some negative thinking about what’s happening in your house when the sun goes down.

It can be difficult to co-sleep and breastfeed on demand with intention when we are constantly beaten down with messaging to the contrary. This leaves some of us of doing these things out of sheer desperation, and with resentment. We search endlessly for alternatives. Our reality is so skewed that we forget what our great-grandmothers knew all along, and what we instinctively knew, too. We blindly follow the pages from a book designed to undermine our innate wisdom as mothers and as parents. We don’t realize the consequences. The book prioritizes convenience, under the guise of protecting a parent’s mental health. It sells, and it spreads like wildfire.

So, let’s back up a bit. Let’s paint a not-sopretty picture.

It’s 2016. I thought my child would be sleeping through the night by now. She’s 11 months old, and she’s not sleeping through. She’s not even sleeping longer than an hour at a time. She’s only settled by an elaborate coordinated dance of rocking and feeding. She is in a cot on the other side of the house and I am getting up each time to settle her before returning to my own bed. We are feeling a bit broken.

At this time, I was depressed. I had many triggers and I was in therapy, but I was convinced that if my daughter slept through the night, the postnatal depression would go away and I would be free of the dark mood and exhaustion I was experiencing. I was obsessing about sleep. It didn’t help that every professional I sought for support was also focused on sleep. It’s hard to know what came first—my obsessive thoughts, or the services fueling them.

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I'd wake up in the morning and my husband would take our daughter so that I could go back to bed for half an hour. Then I'd get up for the day, and it was like a dark cloud entered the kitchen. I would give my husband a detailed account of what happened in the night, justifying my sleep-in. How many times she woke, for how long, what I did to settle her, how tired I felt. It was as if I'd survived an ordeal. I'm pretty sure I even had an app on my phone to track each wake-up. My husband would nod sympathetically. "What are we going to do?" we would ask. He would leave for work and I'd often still be in my pajamas, too exhausted to shower.

I tried everything. I've always felt in my heart that sleep training wasn't right for us, after I'd dabbled in a bit of controlled crying (that was definitely not controlled crying, according to the book). But that didn't stop me from investigating gentle methods. I also had the sleep-inducing smoothies to give her at a certain time each day, a spoonful of coconut oil (supposed to keep a breastfed baby full overnight), magnesium oil to rub on her calves before bed, and more. You name it, I've probably tried it.

Nothing helped.

I was also quite often convinced that something was wrong. Everyone was always asking me whether I'd investigated silent reflux, food intolerances, or if something was wrong with my milk. They just couldn't fathom that she wouldn't "behave."

Eventually, I read a book which opened my eyes to the world of gentle sleep, a concept I didn't even know existed. As a social worker I wanted to practice attachment parenting, but I had all the theory and none of the practice. I got to the end of this book and thought, "But that's just common sense. That doesn't tell me how to do anything!" Ahh, a lightbulb moment! That was the lesson right there.

It was at this time that I also did a lot of soul searching. I was drawn to radical acceptance, and with my newfound understanding, practiced a radical acceptance of my child's sleep habits.

We set up a floor bed and co-slept safely. I stopped checking the time, eventually; it was the hardest habit to let go of. I would drift off to sleep much more quickly without having to get up out of bed again. My daughter's sleep did not change. But my mood and my symptoms improved dramatically. In a way, sleep was the reason for my depression, but not in the way

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that I expected. What I needed to change was internal—my inner world.

But the biggest shift was the change in the language that I was using surrounding sleep. Not just out loud, either—there was a drastic overhaul of my internal dialogue, too. Now, we have two children and our conversations in the morning look very different:

“How was your night?” he’ll ask.

“Normal” I’ll say. He knows exactly what that means.

“Did she wake last night?” I’ll ask of our oldest daughter.

“I think so” he’ll say.

We are curious. But they either needed us or they didn’t, we either responded or we didn’t. There is no speculation about what is wrong, what we should be doing or why it’s happening. We know it’s normal and we know it will pass. We know we don’t have to rush anything.

It’s already prevalent, but with a new baby in tow, when we go to the supermarket (or anywhere, really) people will often ask about sleep. “How much does she sleep? Is she a good baby?”

“Just normal for her age” is always my reply.

You’d be surprised by how many people respond with “So, not a lot then?”

I just smile.

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It's through these interactions that we come to share in this common knowledge: All babies wake, and this obviously means that every baby is not born broken. Yet we seem to suppress this because it's easier than the alternative of shifting our belief system to support the biological norm as opposed to socially constructed ideals. We are just not in acceptance.

This does nothing for our little ones who need our presence, even when it feels like a lot to give at times. Babies are not broken, and do not need to be taught how to sleep. It's the parents who struggle to adjust.

Of course we get tired. Of course we fantasize about a time where we put them to bed, they stay there, and we sleep a full night in our own beds, waking to the sound of happy children getting their own breakfast. It's only natural due to the social conditioning. We are sold this daily. The cot sells it, the sleep books sell it, the "sleep experts" sell it.

Those days may be years away, years that will surely pass. But they are years we don't want to wish away. We don't want to long for a future time where our children are different people. We want to love them right now, as they are. We can choose to love this time, as it is. We are in a space where we're told every day by society that it's the wrong place to be, and yet we are choosing to stay here. That is radical acceptance to me.

I have a challenge for you.

I challenge you to shift the way you think and talk about sleep. Instead of giving a fellow mom at the park a blow-by-blow of your night, rise above and remain matter-of-fact. You can be authentic without hiding behind a coffee meme and a negative tone tarnishing your truth. You can be tired and honor this without feeling like you're going to explode if you don't offload. You can experience your "normal" fully, while knowing that everyone goes through this and is standing alongside you in solidarity because it is indeed normal.

You can change your entire experience of parenting by knowing that night-waking, night-feeding, separation anxiety, and a biological need for your presence is normal, and not something to be changed—or feared. There is no wall to build.

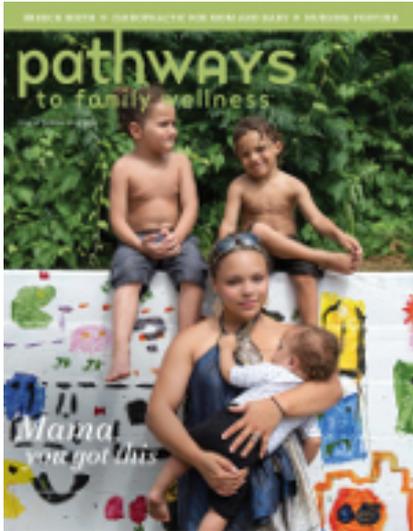
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When you think about the idea of “training” your child to not need you in the night anymore, keep in mind that they are wired to need you to ensure their survival. Training sounds a bit impossible and a bit tiresome. It’s kind of like training them to not need food. We have to let go.

Imagine the weight lifted from your shoulders as you stop fighting the normal, biological needs of your children in the night. Let go of the struggle, especially the internal one. Surrender: No sleep training required.



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