

Pediatric Sleep Issues Can Produce “Night Feeders”

by Bruce H. Berget, M.D., F.A.A.P.

Q: My 9-month-old Amanda wakes up at 3 a.m. every day. I feed her a bottle of formula and she goes back to sleep, but she was sleeping 11 hours straight through the night at six months. I'm exhausted, help!

A: Sounds like Amanda has become what is called “a habitual night feeder.” This is a very common occurrence at this age. A majority of babies “sleep through the night” (i.e., 8 hours or more without waking) by six months of age. Often something disrupts their sleep (e.g., teething pain or an earache) causing them to wake up crying. Parents naturally want to return to sleep as soon as possible and, therefore, offer a bottle which does soothe the baby. Within two or three nights, however, this extra feeding is incorporated into baby's feeding schedule. In order to remedy this problem I recommend:

- A quiet “settling activity” before naps and bedtime (e.g., reading or singing quietly).
- No adrenaline pumping activities (e.g., playing horsey with daddy) before naps or bedtime.
- Giving the feeding (breast or bottle) in a different room than baby's bedroom before the settling activity.
- Putting Amanda to bed while she is still awake. Do not allow her to fall asleep in your arms as we want to teach her to fall asleep alone, in the crib, and learn to self-regulate and self-soothe. After all, if Amanda only knows how to fall asleep in your arms while feeding, naturally that will occur at 3 a.m. as well as 3 p.m..
- Ultimately, you must allow your night feeder to cry herself back to sleep without a feeding. Obviously, initially you will want to check on her to make sure that she is not ill, but once reassured subsequently you can let her cry. This technique is usually successful in breaking the habit within three to five nights.

Parents (particularly mothers) frequently and unnecessarily feel guilty and hard-hearted by this “cold turkey” approach. However, you are teaching your infant important life

skills – i.e., the ability to calm herself and regulate her emotions. In our stressful adult world, this ability is a necessary survival skill which you have helped teach your baby. The approach is the same for the infant who does not require a feeding, but nevertheless is labeled “a habitual night waker.”

Q: My children are ages 3, 8, and 15 years old. How many hours of sleep do they require, and what can I do to help them get the sleep they need?

A: Intuitively, I’m sure you have recognized the inverse relationship between sleep time hours and age. A three-month-old needs about 15 hours of sleep with 10 or more occurring at night and 5 hours of daytime naps. Your three-year-old may be outgrowing the nap with only an hour or so of daytime sleep of the 12 hours of total sleep required. Your eight-year-old still needs a little more than 10 hours of sleep on average, and your 15-year-old requires 8.5 hours or more. Simple measures you can take to assure quality sleep time include:

- A set bedtime and wake up time daily- weekends too.
- Quiet time an hour or so before bedtime.
- Don’t put the kids to bed hungry – a light snack (e.g., milk and a cookie) is helpful; a heavy meal is not.
- Avoid caffeine (and alcohol and smoking for adults) for several hours before sleep.
- For young children, a favored object (e.g., teddy bear, blanket, etc.) can be a comforting sleep mate.
- Ensure that your family gets plenty of outdoor activity daily (after all that’s why we live here).
- Keep the bedroom quiet, dark, and at a comfortable temperature.
- Ban television from the bedroom.
- Don’t use the child’s bedroom for discipline or timeout.

Hopefully, these simple measures will assure a good night’s sleep for parents as well as children.

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