



# Children need us also at night

Why sleep training programmes should not be recommended

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## INTRODUCTION

Babies and toddlers rely upon the loving care and proximity of their caretaker(s) through both the day and the night. They have the same needs throughout the whole day, and they have not yet developed a sensitivity to time. When left alone, an infant will quickly succumb to panic and in a normal, healthy response will try everything within his power to regain the proximity of his caregiver. He will cry to alert his parents to his distress and to encourage them to come, comfort, and provide security. If his cries go unheeded, the child will experience an intense separation anxiety and a breach of trust which can negatively affect the development of a secure attachment between the child and parent which, ultimately, will negatively impact the child's development. Considering all this, it is surprising that counselors still encourage parents today to use sleep training programmes where children are left alone in the dark at night, even though they are so obviously overwhelmed by the situation. The once common "cry it out" method of sleep training is rejected by all experts nowadays because it is very damaging to the child. A modified cry-it-out-type sleep training programme where a child is given short periods of attention from time to time between spells of isolation (so-called conditioning with adapted doses of frustration), however often approved, is just as unreasonable a method to use

to teach a child how to put himself to sleep. The short minutes of attention which the child is given are hardly registered by him in his state of stress and anxiety and serve mostly to relieve the parental conscience. There have been no controlled studies carried out on the possible side effects of such sleep training methods; such studies would be disallowed on ethical grounds. Why then do counsellors find it reasonable to recommend these sleep training methods to parents?

In my work as a breastfeeding consultant, I meet many mothers who, when expressing insecurities about their child's sleep behaviour, have received the counsel that the child should be "sleep trained" (for example by the Kast-Zahn and Morgenroth "Jedes Kind kann Schlafen Lernen" ["Every child can learn to sleep"] method, or the Ferber "Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems" method). However, many mothers feel instinctively that this approach is not good for both them and their children. If they do try such a method in the short term, they are most often left more confused and insecure through the violent screams of their children. The frequent nighttime waking of a child is a challenge for most parents and can lead to great exhaustion. If parents better understand their child's sleep behaviours thanks to more information, they can become more

sensitive to their child's needs and, as a result, can often handle nighttime waking better. Aside from this, there are many good ways to influence the sleep behaviour of a child positively without leaving it alone to cry (see the recommended reading list).

This booklet is intended for those who are active in parent counseling. It shows from today's scientific perspective how the application of sleep training programmes is simply not justifiable. Use of such a programme can harm the child's development and make it difficult for the child to build a good relationship with his parents. Long-term results from bonding research, brain research, and experiences from the everyday life of a counselor demonstrate this impressively. To illustrate, I'll take some words from experts of many different backgrounds. I hope hereby to encourage you to think about these issues critically.

In this booklet you will find some brief excerpts from longer texts; these texts I will happily make available upon request to any interested parties.

Sibylle Lüpold, Bern 2010 (english version 2013)

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**Theresia Herbst, M.Sc.**, Child Psychologist, Vienna

“The secure attachment of a child to his caregivers gives him the best possible start in life in the areas of emotional and psycho-social development. The infant can only feel and perceive what happens to him. He develops expectations and behaviour patterns through these experiences. For this reason, maternal sensitivity to the needs of her child is deemed to be of the greatest importance in the formation of a secure attachment. Here, maternal sensitivity to the needs of her child should be taken to mean recognising his signals, interpreting them correctly, and responding appropriately – giving her baby what he needs: physical contact upon a desire for nearness, food when hungry, etc. – and immediately, never once leaving her baby to cry. When the baby feels secure, the emergence of a strong attachment is promoted through loving care and speech, physical contact (...),

breastfeeding on demand (...), co-sleeping (being close to the parents while sleeping) and support while he makes his attempts at exploration and autonomy. (...) The benefits of secure attachment: The secure attachment protects. It strengthens the sense of basic trust, self-esteem, the ability to deal with other people in a socially competent way, and the ability to explore the world and to interact with it in a courageous and emotionally balanced manner. The secure attachment is one of the most important protective factors for mental health. It can be considered an ‘emotional cushion,’ which can mitigate the negative effects of both the small tragedies of everyday life and the larger tragic blows of fate experienced over a whole lifetime.”

[www.sicherebindung.at](http://www.sicherebindung.at)  
[www.kinderpsychologin.at](http://www.kinderpsychologin.at)

**Prof. Dr. Klaus E. Grossmann**, Attachment Researcher, University of Regensburg

“Crying is one of the few ways in which an infant can communicate, especially when he is left alone at night. Over 50 years ago, it was proven that when parents respond sensitively to their child's cries, the child will cry less often and will quickly learn to communicate his needs in other ways: through mimic, gesture

and voice modulation. However, if left alone to cry in a dark room at night, the child will learn to fear darkness and abandonment. These anxieties will get stronger with time, and the crying will be increasingly accompanied by the release of the stress hormone cortisol. In contrast, a 10-month-old infant who

has learnt that someone will come to him when he cries does not experience such a release of cortisol. The more frequent and the longer an infant must cry without being comforted, the faster the cortisol will spread in the brain and the lower his stress tolerance threshold will become. Such children will eventually stop crying, but from exhaustion and resignation rather than from acceptance. They do not learn to communicate in more differentiated and subtle ways in lieu of crying. Crying is a distress signal, which nature has designed to be so intense that we adults do not get used to it and go to soothe the crying child. Instinctively, crying sends the message, “help; if no one comes, I will die.”

Sensitive therapists do not recommend that parents ignore any of their babies’ cries, but rather encourage parents to give prompt and appropriate responses

**Dr. med. William Sears**, Paediatrician, California

“When you use the non-responding approach, you are using the principle of non-reinforcement: If you do not reinforce a behaviour, the behaviour soon stops. This behaviouristic approach bothers me for two reasons. First, it assumes that the baby’s crying is a negative behaviour which should be extinguished, a false assumption. Secondly, it may have a damaging effect on the baby’s emerging self-esteem. When a baby cries and no one listens, the

to the more subtle expressions of need made before the baby must resort to crying. Crying is not a “manipulative behavior”, but a fundamental, last resort communication between an infant and his attachment figures. It can sometimes be difficult to deal with a crying child, but an infant who is left to fend for himself will only give up from exhaustion. How can this be considered a success?

Infants depend upon physical nearness, also when falling asleep. We, as parents, must acquiesce to this need, which is not always easy.

In raising our children, we should not strive to get them to stop crying, but rather to remove their need to cry.”

Personal opinion, July 2010

baby’s internal motivation for crying lessens. (...) This is why non-reinforcement seems to work. (...) crying is a tiny baby’s only network of communication to the outside world. (...) As the baby loses trust in his ability to communicate, he also loses trust that his caregiver will respond. The “let cry” advice may produce a short-term gain, but a long-term loss. In my opinion, opting for the short-term gain is not a wise choice. Another defense of the unresponsive

approach is that the baby must learn to sleep. By not responding to a baby’s cries, you are not really teaching that baby to sleep; you are teaching your baby that cries have no communicative value. When cries are not responded to, a baby may fall back to sleep on his own, but this is a sign of withdrawal following the disappointment of not being

**Dr. med. Rüdiger Posth**, Paediatrician, Child Psychotherapist, Bergisch-Gladbach

“Any attempt to force a tolerance for falling asleep or staying asleep without the presence of the caregiver is, as with leaving a child alone to cry at any other time, harmful and should be ruled out for humane and ethical reasons alone. Also when an older, now well-attached child experiences a real separation anxiety when left alone in the evening to fall asleep, such conditioning techniques should be rejected. That many parents purport that it is done in the child’s interest, using a corruption of pseudo-educational concepts to justify the approach when it is clearly done only to make life easier for the parents, is to be criticized. An infant or toddler experiences falling asleep as a separation from his caregiver and develops a fear of being abandoned when mother or father leaves the room in the evening darkness.”

Posth 2007: 92

“It does not make sense to try teaching a small infant to delay his needs by

listened to. By not giving in to your baby, you are teaching him to give up. I have great difficulty with the wisdom of this approach. It is night training, not nighttime parenting. We train pets; we *parent* children.”

Sears, Nighttime Parenting

not responding to his cries until a given amount of time has passed on the stopwatch. This negative conditioning based principle of education does seemingly work, but is one of the biggest mistakes parents can commit when raising their offspring. Even when such conditioning appears to be successful in that it quenches the undesired behaviour, this success comes at a cost to the emotional development of the child! While the child will give up crying and screaming in time because he has learnt that his screams go unheard – thus the intended effect of the conditioning being achieved – the frustration and negative stress which accompany the child’s feelings of abandonment will unfavourably affect the mental health and brain development of the child.”

Posth 2007: 157

In the book *Ich will bei euch schlafen!* you can read more about Dr. Posth’s critical view of sleep training methods.

**Prof. Dr. Gerald Hüther**, Head of the Center for Neurobiological Prevention Research, University of Göttingen

“Of course, the use of a sleep training method is not only a burden to an infant, but also has a deep and lasting impact upon his trust in himself (my crying does not help) and in his caregivers (they do not come when I need them). One can, of course, condition a child to come to terms with this. And of course, through these experiences,

these behaviour patterns will be established and stabilized in the neuronal circuits in the brain. In this way they are prepared in a brutal manner to the sad reality of our current childraising culture – their brains are optimally adapted to what they are shown they can expect.”

Personal communication, 30. June 2009

**Dr. med. Gudrun von der Ohe**, IBCLC, Hamburg

“*Jedes Kind kann schlafen lernen* [‘Every child can learn to sleep’]. This book is a sad reflection of how our society deals with children. No family is asked how lovingly it deals with the needs of its infant. On the contrary, when the baby just a few weeks old comes the apparently most important question: ‘Does it sleep through the night?’. For all parents who need answer ‘no’ to this question, the next question arises naturally: ‘What have we done wrong?’.

During the first six months, a child is allowed to wake during the night, but thereafter it needs to sleep through. Or so it is suggested in this book. Evidence-based knowledge about how children sleep is mixed with assertions: children must fall asleep on thier

own – without mother’s breast, without parents in the room, without pacifier and perhaps even without a cuddly toy. They seem to have no needs. (...) Often children will fall asleep and stay asleep using this method. Does this mean that the child has learnt to sleep alone? In my opinion, it has learnt something else: I can be in trouble and I can scream, but no-one will come to help me. It will fall into a depressed and deep, dreamless sleep. This also means the loss of basic trust which will have effects that last into adulthood. Is this perhaps one reason for the many sleep disturbances in our generation or in the generation of our parents?”

December 2009

**Prof. Dr. med. Michael Abou-Dakn**, Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at St. Joseph Hospital Berlin

“Children need to be close to their parents and quickly learn to trust that this closeness is at hand. The proximity of the parents, especially when falling asleep, is an essential part of later attachment security. Children cannot be spoiled, but can very quickly be made to lose their trust and thus be made to feed unsafe. However, only children who have been made strong can be strong later in life. For this, the parents need to invest time and patience.

Unfortunately, the desire that a child fall asleep easily and stay asleep for a long time has become a greivous issue

of our time. What in earlier times was the issue of early potty-training has today become the issue of falling asleep and staying asleep. Such tendencies have to be reconsidered and parents need to be factually informed and advised accordingly. We can only hope that the many false Guides and Books finally find their right place – away from the bookshelves and bedside tables of inexperienced parents and into the trashbin!”

Personal communication, March 2010

**Dr. Luciano Gasser**, Developmental Psychologist, Lecturer at the Pedagogical University of Lucerne

“There seems to be an unfortunate gap between experts and practitioners. Articles in professional journals are published only after having being reviewed by anonymous experts. Guidebooks (such as *Solve Your Child’s Sleep Problems*, for example) do not go through this review process. Pediatricians also sometimes have inaccurate perceptions of developmental psychology (...). Can it be considered a success when a child ceases to announce his

needs? We know very well that building a secure attachment in the first and second year of life is the basis of all development. The child learns how relationships work and builds trust. This also influences his later relationships. I would definitely strongly advise against playing with this formative and sensitive development stage.”

Lüpold, 2009: 35

**Dr. phil. hist. Franz Renggli**, Psychoanalyst, Family and Baby Therapist, Basel

“Sleep training methods shake up all emotions. This has immense implications for the future emotional perceptions of a person and will come to the fore again in a very problematic way in all of his future interpersonal relationships.”  
Lüpold, 2009: 128

**Jane Daep-Kerrison**, Midwife, Lactation Consultant, Arbon

“In some sentences of the book *Jedes Kind kann Schlafen Lernen* [‘Every child can learn to sleep’], I really wonder why mothers do not become suspicious. For example, the statement that children learn to stop crying through the sleep training programme. As a mother, I would ask myself at this point: ‘Do I want my child to forget how to cry?’ It concerns me that this book appeals to so many parents. These days, we want to be able to control everything and are not willing to accept each child as it is.”  
Lüpold, 2009: 137

**Dr. med. Caroline Benz, Prof. Dr. med. Remo Largo**, Children’s Hospital Zürich

“In our experience, children and parents are often overwhelmed with the controlled crying Ferber method of sleep training. Over months, the children have become accustomed to the presence and help of parents while falling asleep and react with fear, as can be expected. Parents are overwhelmed by these unexpectedly strong reactions and stop using this method. Before a cognitive-behavioral approach is chosen, it should be clear that the reason for the child’s sleep problem does not lie in a not-yet-set internal clock or in that his need for sleep is overestimated. We recommend parents who come to us for advice in our sleep clinic to use a stepwise procedure. Under a specialist’s instructions, the parents introduce a regular bedtime rhythm and adjust the bedtime to the individual child’s need for sleep. Star-

ting from about 9 months on, unfavorable sleeping habits can be altered. By introducing sleep rituals, the child is prepared for going to bed. Then, it is laid into its bed while still awake. The mother remains beside the bed, comforting the slightly crying child, but no longer taking it into her arms. Once the child accepts the changed setting, the mother moves her chair increasingly further away from the bed until, finally, she leaves the room. By using this gradual approach, the child learns to fall asleep by itself in the presence of its parents. The stepwise approach allows every family to proceed according to its own needs and at its own pace.”  
Personal communication, June 2010

**Prof. Dr. Jürgen Zulley**, Sleep researcher, Director of the Sleep Medicine Centers, Regensburg

“Many babies and young children cannot sleep alone; for this they need the closeness of the parents - and I think it is wrong to try to train this healthy desire out of them. (...) You cannot force the child (to sleep through the night) until it is ripe to learn this skill. At some point, every child will learn to sleep through the night, each according to its own pace.”  
Lüpold, 2009: 120

**Jörn Borke**, Head of the Baby Clinic in Osnabrück, Dipl. Developmental-psychologist, and Research Assistant to Prof. Heidi Keller

“I find it very alarming that the Ferber method is still considered the only option in many cases by many professional groups. The sleep situation should be better investigated instead of simply recommending the book *Jedes Kind kann Schlafen Lernen* [‘Every child can learn to sleep’] in all cases. It can also be problematic when parents buy this book and apply the method themselves. If used improperly, under certain conditions it can lead to a strengthening of the sleep difficulties.”  
Personal communication, June 2010

**Paula Diederichs**, Body Psychotherapist and Head of the “Schreiambulanz” Berlin (a crisis centre that handles babies that cry excessively and their parents)

“The desperate mother tries aid strategies (for example the Ferber sleep method), which she does not really endorse. Normally, she would immediately wave such things off, saying, “this is not something I will do to my child” but in her desperation, she is ready to try anything. She wishes only to have this intolerable situation remedied.

Popular aid strategies include (...) the book *Jedes Kind kann Schlafen Lernen* [‘Every child can learn to sleep’]. The title alone is a grandiose promise of help in connection with coping with a screaming baby because the statement ‘every child can learn to sleep’ is not believable if it does not apply also in this one case. According to its author, the methods should be used on infants

starting from six months on, and is a behavioural therapeutic programme for sleep training children. This ‘assistance’ consists of the advice that a mother, in her efforts to calm her child, go beyond the limits of both herself and her child. This endeavour seldom achieves a desired, lasting effect because it is usually not a real solution to the problem. (...)

Some self-help literature, such as the aforementioned book ‘Every child can learn to sleep’, promise much, but from the point of view of body psychotherapy are highly questionable and recommend very abusive and anxiety-producing methods.“

From *Auf die Welt gekommen* by Thomas Harms, 2000: 240/258

**Dr. med. Herbert Renz-Polster**, Pediatrician and Lecturer at the University of Heidelberg

“Pedagogical successes are neither proven nor to be expected using the Ferber method. There is no evidence that Ferber’s sleep-“learning” brings a developmental advantage to the child (...). The ability to fall asleep independently may be considered progress by the parents or by the family as a whole, but for the child itself, this brings no advantage.

From the pedagogical point of view,

it should also be noted that using the Ferber method leads to an inevitable educational methodology conflict. During the day, many parents are eager to instill in their children the largest possible degree of self-confidence, and so unflinchingly take their children’s statements seriously and offer emotional support (...). When leaving their children to cry at night, however, the otherwise unquestioned addressing of

the child’s needs and offering of emotional security are neglected just as the child is exposed to the fearful situation

of falling asleep.”

Renz-Polster, 2010: 112-113

**Dr. Katherine Dettwyler**, Nutrition Scientist and Anthropologist, Texas

“It’s normal for babies to be agitated when they wake up and there’s no-one there. There are NO ‘natural’ circumstances under which one might expect a baby to fall asleep alone and to go back to sleep alone again, to comfort himself (...). We can try all sorts of tricks to convince babies that they do not need their parents during the night (...) we can label the normal needs of children as ‘bad habits’ or ‘manipulation’, and we can justify our behaviour towards the children with all sorts of carefully thought-out cultural beliefs. Anyway, none of this changes the essential biological, physiological and emotional assessment of a child with the expectation to be born, to be

held in the arms of his mother, to sleep next to her, and to be breastfed day and night as required – well beyond the first years. (...) We cannot solve the problem of parents becoming annoyed when they are awakened by their children at night as long as we hold to the belief that children have no legitimate needs and as long as we view waking up in the night as a ‘bad habit’. Instead of trying to change the essential nature of children (which is impossible), we must work to change the system of cultural beliefs and the parental attitudes.”

Dettwyler, *Breastfeeding and Cosleeping in Anthropological Perspective*

**Dr. med. Carlos González**, Pediatrician, Barcelona

“Children are not demanding. For the things that seem unimportant to them, they are always willing to concede to our whims and do what we ask of them. But, if we demand that they sleep alone we require something that contradicts their basic instincts, and the fight is tough. (...)

...remember that you teach your child nothing (with sleeping alone) that he

needs himself, but rather a skill that benefits you if acquired. You are not doing your child a favour, but asking a favour of him. If he does you this favour, then you must be grateful to him. And if not, then bear it with patience; the child is under no obligation.”

González, 2006: 162,166

**Prim. Dr. med. Franz Paky**, Pediatrician and Head of the “Schreiambulanz” Mödling (a crisis centre that handles babies that cry excessively and their parents)

*“The art of letting one’s child sleep*

(...) For a child, there is nothing worse than losing protection and parental security. With the darkness of the night, certainty of parental protection being provided is torn away. (...) Not all children who easily fall asleep and who sleep through the night are to be envied. When babies recognise that their cries in the night will not bring their parents to the scene under any circumstances, they give up and sleep the sleep of resignation. (...)

*Jedes Kind kann Schlafen Lernen* [‘Every child can learn to sleep’]

Because it is difficult to make these connections, books that claim to train

children’s behaviours are very popular. Most popular at the moment are methods of dosed frustration. Instead of the parent changing himself, he leaves the child to cry a little longer until it is convinced that there is no question of the parent coming in as watchman and comforter during the night. A seeming success will come in that the child will sleep, but it is the sleep of resignation. The chance that both parent and child will learn something and grow through solving the problem of disturbed sleep together will be missed.”

Complete (German) text on [www.docs4you.at](http://www.docs4you.at) 2009

**Sibylle Lüpold**, Lactation Consultant, Bern

“It is interesting that otherwise behaviour-conditioning methods are used mainly in animal training. To apply such methods in the education of children is, ethically speaking, highly questionable. The methods of conditioning assume a mechanistic image of man whereby it is not taken into consideration that every child is an individual. A requirement of applying such conditioning methods should be that the student voluntarily takes part, which is certainly not the case with babies and infants. (...)

Natural steps in child development cannot be accelerated. Children learn

to eat, to talk, to walk, to go to the toilet, and also to fall asleep and to stay asleep when they have attained the necessary maturity to learn these skills. (...) Children normally develop these skills with a lot of motivation and joy. (...) Does it not surprise us then that the learning of how to sleep is seemingly connected with so much suffering and tears? (...) The child’s development of the skill to sleep distinguishes itself from the learning of the skills of walking, talking or eating in that this skill can actually be forced, even though the child is not yet ready to learn it. (...) An infant

can not defend itself when its parents leave it to lie alone in a crib. It must accept this situation as inevitable. It is true that the child cries and screams because it is scared and desperate, but if the parents do not react to these cries the child will fall asleep, exhausted and frustrated. It was not helped to learn something it wanted to learn because it

was ready to learn it, but it has learnt it because it simply had no other choice. The child learns not really how to sleep, but rather how to bear in silence that it must lie alone in its bed.”

Lüpold, 2009: 90/109-111  
[www.kindernächte.ch](http://www.kindernächte.ch)

“Ich will bei euch schlafen!”

“I want to sleep with you!” Peaceful nights for parents and children  
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## RECOMMENDED READING

- Dewar, Gwen “Sleep training: The Ferber method and its alternatives”, [www.parentingscience.com/Ferber-method.html](http://www.parentingscience.com/Ferber-method.html), 2008
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# Children need us also at night

Sibylle Lüpold, Publisher

Why sleep training programmes should not be recommended



Abou-Dakn Benz Borke Daep-Kerrison  
Dettwyler Diederichs Gasser González Gross-  
mann Herbst Hüther Largo Lüpold von der Ohe  
Paky Posth Renggli Renz-Polster Sears Zully:  
20 Expert Opinions Against Sleep Training

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