

May 3, 2021 / [Pediatrics](#)

When and How to Sleep Train Your Baby

Often times, sleep training is tougher on the parent than the child

You can't take the sleepless nights anymore. You're so delirious from lack of sleep you could cry. By now, you're starting to wonder if it's officially time to sleep train your baby.

But you're worried. Is your baby old enough? What techniques work best? And how long does it actually take? Pediatrician [Noah Schwartz, MD](#) offers sleep training advice for exhausted new parents.

Sleep training basics

In its simplest form, sleep training is the process of your baby learning to fall asleep by themselves — whether that's in the very beginning of the night when they are put into their crib or when they wake up in the middle of the night.

“Essentially, you're getting your baby to realize that they can put themselves to sleep or self soothe,” explains Dr. Schwartz. “It's a development skill they will need to learn.”

Sleep training translates to more sleep for parents or caregivers.

Night weaning vs. sleep training

It's important to note that sleep training is a separate thing from night [weaning](#).

For months, you've likely woken up several times a night to feed your little one. Night weaning is making sure your baby is eating their meals during the day, so that they don't have to wake up to eat in the middle of the night anymore. Night weaning is perfectly safe as long as your baby is healthy and at an appropriate weight. Talk to your pediatrician about when it's time to night wean your baby.

You can sleep train and night wean at the same time. In fact, sleep training will sometimes lead to a drop off in overnight feedings simply because your baby will learn to fall back asleep on their own. But sometimes, if your baby is underweight or has other medical conditions, you might need to continue night feeding, even during or after sleep training.

When should you start sleep training?

Dr. Schwartz recommends to begin sleeping training when your baby is about four months old. At this age, babies are typically old enough to learn to self soothe, and may no longer require night feedings. Additionally,

at around four months, your baby's sleep cycles begin to mature and their circadian rhythm (the hormonal cycle which regulates our sleep-wake cycles) starts to take effect.

Some babies can start sleep training earlier and some do better a little later, around the six month mark. If you're unsure if your baby is old enough or ready, check with your pediatrician to get the green light first.

How long does sleep training take?

The amount of time it takes to successfully sleep train your baby will depend on what method you choose. But generally speaking, it should take about three to four nights. Some methods may take longer than others, but Dr. Schwartz says most of it comes down to parents having a plan and being consistent with their chosen sleep training method.

If you've been attempting to sleep train your baby for two weeks with no luck, it's a good idea to check in with your pediatrician.

Is sleep training safe?

There has been ample long-term research studying sleep training, and there is no evidence that sleep training is physically or psychologically damaging to babies and children. In fact, it's been known to improve parental mood, improves an infant's sleep quality and

increases the secure attachment between babies and their caregivers. As long as your baby is old enough and is in a safe environment, sleep training (no matter which method you choose) is perfectly safe and healthy.

Sleep training techniques

The goal of sleep training is to teach your little one that they are capable of falling asleep independently. You want your baby to be able to fall asleep on their own without needing to be rocked or soothed by you.

“Often times, sleep training techniques overlap and parents combine methods, which is perfectly fine,” says Dr. Schwartz. “It’s all about finding what works best for you as a parent and how your infant responds.”

Here are some of the most common sleep training approaches:

Cry it out (CIO)

Perhaps one of the most famously known techniques, this method is often synonymous with sleep training. CIO involves putting your baby to bed while they are tired but still awake so that they learn the skill of putting themselves to sleep on their own. Your baby may cry in the process while they learn this new skill, but that certainly isn’t a requirement!

Before putting your baby to bed, make sure they have a clean diaper, they’ve eaten and their crib is safe. After that, once you say goodnight, you won’t pick them up

or take them out of the crib until morning, or until their next scheduled night feed.

This method is perhaps the most difficult for parents, but it often works the quickest. The first couple of nights are typically the roughest, because your baby is used to falling asleep with assistance, and it may take them a night or two to learn that they can do it on their own, but it should improve quickly after that.

Consistency is important and all caregivers need to be on board for it to work. A key part of CIO is not taking your baby out of the crib, but some parents may feel better acknowledging or reassuring them by doing a few quick check-ins throughout the night (see the Ferber method).

Ferber method (also known as “check and console”)

This technique consists of timed interval check-ins. When your infant is tired, but still awake (sensing a theme here?), place them in their crib, say goodnight, and leave the room. You will then re-enter the room at designated intervals to check in on your baby, but you still should not pick them up.

For example, after putting your baby down, check-in at three minutes, five minutes, 10 minutes and so forth. You can briefly say a word or two to your baby, for example, tell them you love them, they are doing a

great job or that you are here for them, but don't linger for too long.

The time between each interval should get longer, teaching your baby that you are always there to support them and make them feel safe. Increase the time between check-ins each night. Some babies benefit from the timed check-ins, while others become more upset seeing their parents come and go. Many caregivers combine CIO and the Ferber method depending on their baby's needs.

Pick up, put down

This approach takes patience (and perhaps the most time), but it typically makes sleep training feel easier on the parents. The idea is that you can provide direct physical comfort to your baby by picking them up and putting them down when they begin to cry or fuss during the night. But be sure you don't linger when you pick them up. Go in, pick them up, sooth them so they settle down, put them back in the crib, then leave the room. It's common to combine this method with the Ferber method.

The chair method

This sleep training technique involves – you guessed it – a chair. It also involves lots of patience and time. It's similar to the Ferber method in that it involves gradual intervals.

Put your baby in their crib while they are drowsy and sit in a chair next to them. Once they fall asleep, leave the room. If they begin to cry, come back in and sit in the chair nearby. Every few nights move the chair back further until you're eventually out of the room.

Dr. Schwartz says this method can be tough on the parent as it can be hard to just sit there until your baby falls asleep, especially if they begin to fuss or cry. It can also be distracting and confusing to the baby to see you there, in some cases.

Bedtime fading

This isn't sleep training in as much as it's a method to move your baby's bedtime to a different time. For example, if you typically put your baby down around 7 p.m., but they cry for about 30 minutes in their crib, their natural bedtime (aka their circadian rhythm) is likely closer to 7:30 p.m. If you'd like to move up their natural bedtime, begin shifting back bedtime by 15 minutes each night until you've reached the desired time. This technique is often used in combination with other sleep training methods to get your baby on a better sleep schedule.

Sleep training tips

No matter what method you try, sleep training takes practice and patience. These tips can help you and your baby make the transition. Here's what to keep in mind:

- **Some methods won't work for you – and that's OK.** It might take some trial and error to figure out a method that both you, your partner and your baby are comfortable with. Don't be afraid to bail on a method if it's a total nightmare and remember to combine if needed. No one method works for everyone and there's no right or wrong way to do it. However, once you do find a method you are comfortable with, be consistent for at least one week, to give your baby a chance to learn this new skill.
- **It really comes down to the parent or caregiver to make sleep training work.** Dr. Schwartz says sleep training has more to do with the parent and less to do with the baby. Caregivers should know their personality and limits when they begin sleep training. They should also commit to a consistent sleep training schedule. It will never work if one partner breaks from the routine every night. That being said, [always trust your intuition](#) – you know your baby best.
- **Establish a bedtime routine.** Getting your baby ready for bed is just as important as the actual sleep training itself. Newborns (and even toddlers) have no concept of time, but when you develop a bedtime routine, it starts to get them in the mindset of recognizing what is about to happen. Try bath, feeding and [reading a book](#). You can also try

feeding your baby in a different room or setting to help decrease their sleep-onset association. Kids will start to associate this routine with learning to relax and winding down for the night. Oftentimes, a bedtime routine transfers over into the ability to [self-soothe](#) for many babies and toddlers.

- **Time it right.** Look for your [baby's sleep cues](#) like yawning or rubbing their eyes. All sleep methods recommend starting when your baby is tired, but not asleep yet.
- **Don't respond to every little cry or noise.** As long as your baby is sleeping in a safe place, there is no reason to panic over every cry or fuss. No matter what sleep training method you use, there is likely to be some crying or fussing involved. It's important to give your baby the space to learn this important new skill. Your future self will thank you when you've made it to the other side of sleep training!
- **Be confident in yourself!** Your baby will pick up on your emotions. If you feel confident throughout this process your baby will feel that way too.

Never hesitate to reach out to your pediatrician for any advice or help when it comes to sleep training, or any other question or concern you might have.