

TAGS: Transitioning Home; Sleep Issues

Balancing Attachment and Sleep with Adopted Kids

Sleep, or the distinct lack thereof, is one of the most common issues that new adoptive families face. Some variation on the following questions are frequent fodder for conversation between parents who are concerned about balancing healthy attachment with getting a good night's sleep for everyone.

- “How do you know when it is ok to let your adopted child learn to self soothe through longer crying/fussing before you go into them or comfort them? I struggle to know when it's safe to let them self soothe as opposed to picking them up. I'm so tired!”
- “My two kids do not sleep through the night-EVER! They were adopted at age 2 and 2.5 from foster care. One had been with another foster family from birth and the other was placed with us at 2 after she was removed from her birth family for neglect. They are now 4 and 5 and are still waking several times every night. My husband and I have not slept together for 3 years! On some level I think I may be the problem. I read everything I can about attachment and was determined that I would do everything in my power to help these girls attach. I certainly succeeded at that, but I think I may have gone overboard. I can't stand to hear them cry or for them to be unhappy, especially at night. I go to them immediately and it drives my husband up the wall. He and I fight over it frequently. He thinks I'm spoiling them. I would love any advice you can give me.”
- “We adopted our beautiful baby boy 10 months ago. We were at the hospital for his birth and he came home with us directly from the hospital. He has never slept through the night and still wakes at least 2 times every night. I think he is ready to sleep through the night, but all the adoption forums explode when I tell them I'm going to let him cry it out for even a short time. It's like I'm going to be ruining him for life. Help!”

Do any of these experiences sound familiar? Take heart! You are not alone. There is balance to be found. And sleep to be had.

First Goal is Attachment

With a newly adopted child, the first goal is to help create attachment. This may involve lots of holding and touching, and immediately responding to every need. It can also often include doing things with older children that are more common with younger children, such as rocking to sleep, bottle feeding, cuddling until the child falls asleep, etc. All this is well and good and maybe even necessary, but at what point should you prioritize your need for sleep?

As with many similar parenting issues, no one answer will fit every family, but the bottom line is that once you believe your child is secure in his attachment, it should be fine to start focusing on creating sleep habits that are sustainable for everyone in the family. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does my child seem firmly attached during the day?
- Does he routinely turn to me for comfort and help?
- Has she been home long enough to feel secure?
- Was there something in his history that makes nighttime a particularly anxious time?

Some families do not mind the constant attention at night or they decide that they are comfortable with co-sleeping or the family bed. If you are not one of those families, however, depending on the answers to these questions, it may be time to wean your child off your constant presence at night if that is your family goal.

Moving Towards Comfortable Sleep Habits

If your child's sleep habits and bedtime routines are not a good long-term fit, there is help. Once you believe your child is firmly attached (and you can trust your gut on this) your goal should be to maintain the minimal emotional and physical presence necessary at night to rightfully care for your child, but no more interaction than that.

For example, if you have been lying with your child to get her to sleep, try to gradually move to sitting on the bed, then to sitting on the floor beside the bed, to sitting by the door, to sitting in the hall outside her door. If you have been sleeping with her all night, gradually wean yourselves from laying in the bed, to sleeping on an air mattress on the floor beside her bed, to gradually in the hall, to your own bed with a monitor.

If your child has been sleeping in your bed and you want him to sleep in his own bed, talk with him about how he is growing up and how he can sleep by himself. Start by making a cozy nest or pallet on the floor beside your bed and then slowly move the pallet ever closer to his room.

Brainstorm with Your Child

Talk with your child about her needs and fears. Brainstorm ideas that could make it easier for her to feel connected to you at night without being with you. Some children find comfort having a picture of their parents near the bed. Others might want a transitional object that carries the familiar smell of the parent, such as using your pillow or sleeping with your t-shirt. Could listening to an audiobook help ease her into sleep? Would leaving the door open with a night light be helpful? Use a "baby" monitor and show your child how it works, that you can hear her and will respond to her need. Gauge her progress in conversations and think together about how far she's come and what the goal is. The bottom line is to involve your child in solving the problem with you.

If your child is fearful at night, it helps to talk about their fears. Parents may worry that they are encouraging the fears if they talk about them, but usually it is the opposite. Common fears at night include fear of not being able to fall asleep, fear of dying at night, and fear of bad guys and monsters. Parents can help children deal with their fears if they understand what they are.

For some kids, there are fears based on what happened in their life prior to adoption. For those children, their bedtime needs and fears are often a symptom and can give insight into what they are trying to process. Talk with your child's therapist about the best way to help your child heal from these experiences.

For the Very Active Child

Some kids are whirling dervishes during their every waking moment and the only time they have to slow down and think is at night. Then those thoughts can be scary and overwhelming. For these very active kiddos you may need to create an opportunity during the day to slow down enough to allow them to become accustomed to processing thoughts and to give them an opportunity to do it during the safer

daytime hours.

The Trick is Your Belief

The reality is that often the real problem is our belief that our child is not capable of learning to sleep by themselves. Parents must believe that their child can fall asleep and stay asleep before the child will believe it.

Our partners at [Creating a Family](#) have many resources related to sleep issues with adopted children, including the radio show [Sleep Issues with Adopted Kids](#), from which much of this information was gleaned.

Additionally, this resource, from [NACAC](#) and written by Dr. Bruce Perry, [Supporting Maltreated Children: Countering the Effects of Neglect and Abuse](#), offers an overview of how neglect and abuse affect the child's development and how you can act to bring healing for your child.