



THE SLEEPLESS GENERATION

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It's ten p.m. and I can hear him in there. His baby brother is fast asleep. But my older son, Mason, is wide awake. He's leafing through comic books and sneaking out of bed, rummaging around for action figures. Just a few weeks shy of his fifth birthday, Mason can write his name, throw a baseball, even croon a wicked rendition of "Go Tell Aunt Rhody." But he hasn't learned how to go to sleep.

Bedtime is a tense negotiation, an unpredictable mix of hugs and tears and impish grins and broken promises to stay in bed. Once he crashes, it's only a matter of hours before he's at our bedside, climbing under the covers or beckoning us to his room. Much as his dad and I adore him, the late nights and interrupted sleep are getting to us. And we know they're not doing him any good.

After talking with friends and strangers, I'm realizing we've got a lot of company. Families across America aren't sleeping. Kim West, a Maryland-based therapist known as "The Sleep Lady" and author of *Good Night, Sleep Tight*, works with families who have tried and failed with **co-sleeping** but don't want to give it up because they like it or feel guilty.

She sees other parents who are using a crib but can't bear to let their babies cry at night. They constantly intervene, attempting to soothe the baby back to sleep with an arsenal of hugs, feedings and impromptu co-sleeping.

There's a common denominator, West says. "The big issue is: Do your children know how to put themselves to sleep without you doing something to them or for them?" she says. "Because if they can't do it for the onset of sleep, they can't do it in the middle of the night or for a nap."

The upshot? No one sleeps well.

"It's a major problem. I hear it all the time," says *Complete Confidence* author and New York psychotherapist Sheenah Hankin. "You've got exhausted parents and exhausted kids. Their idea is that kids mustn't get upset or cry. So these children aren't learning to soothe themselves at all." Soothing newborns is vital, of course, she says. "But older children, if you don't lead them to manage their own emotions, they won't learn how."

Babies who can't self-soothe quickly grow into preschoolers who won't sleep unless there's a cuddly parent in their bed. That leaves parents and kids exhausted, and marriages strained as couples either sleep separately or share their bed with one or more elbowing, teeth-grinding, frequently awakened offspring.

After co-sleeping with their son for his first eighteen months, Sara and A.J. Mass have taught him to sleep all night in his own bed – sort of. Mass, who lives in southern New Jersey, says, "There are some nights, he'll come in our room now fifteen times: 'I want juice, I'm too hot, I'm too cold.' He has a million reasons."

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This situation – challenging with one child – can get worse with two or more kids in the house.

After co-sleeping when her kids were babies, Jolie Nichols and her husband slowly transitioned them to their own beds. "My oldest was not okay with phasing out of being in my bed. The younger one was better," she says, because they were a bit stricter with him.

Nichols would lie in bed with her daughter, read stories, then wait until her daughter fell asleep. Trouble was, Nichols often fell asleep too, which meant her night was basically over. If she tried leaving while her daughter was awake, there was a battle. "It's pretty consistent," says Nichols, who lives in Minneapolis. "She's always been the one to fight it."

Of course, bedtime isn't all unhappiness at these houses, just like it isn't at mine. There's something fantastic about falling asleep with your child nestled in your protective embrace. Nichols, Mass and other parents speak with real joy about smuggling up with their kids, especially after a day away from them. As you're drifting off to sleep, it's hard to believe there's a downside.

But parents and children sleep lighter and get more stimulation when they're together. "In the sleep laboratory at the University of California's Irvine School of Medicine," wrote Notre Dame professor and attachment parenting cheerleader James J. McKenna, "we found that bed-sharing infants face their mothers for most of the night, and that mother and infant are highly responsive to each other's movements, wake more frequently, and spend more time in lighter stages of sleep than they do while sleeping alone."

That's cited as evidence that you won't roll over on your kid during the night and you'll know if they stop breathing. Comforting to those fearing SIDS, yes. But we're wired to need deep sleep. Sleep lightly for too long and you end up exhausted.

Even parents currently getting rest with their infants worry about what comes later. Megan Odell's five-month-old son starts his night in a bassinet, "falling asleep with us nearby," she says. "When it's time for us to go to bed, we pick him up and carry him upstairs. He'll just sleep in the transition or I'll nurse him a little to get back to sleep." It's good right now, she says, but "I'm aware there's gonna potentially be problems down the road."

5 Reasons Gen-X Parents Obsess About Kids' Sleep

1. Talk Shows

In the '80s, long before Dr. Phil, talk show host Phil Donahue provided a televised, national forum for private family drama. Oprah, Geraldo, Sally Jesse and a host of imitators soon jumped on board, and afternoon TV was dominated by talk of messed-up lives. More often than not, parents were to blame. At the movies, we heard it too: The decade started with "Ordinary People" and ended with "Rain Man." In between, we saw "On Golden Pond," "Terms of Endearment" and other Oscar-winning odes to destructive parenting. Even John Hughes explored it. Yes, "Sixteen Candles" and "The Breakfast Club" were about falling in love. But the backdrop was a chronicle of wrongs done by parents. So, the sound of tears at night can trigger awful visions of our kid in therapy – or making out with Judd Nelson.

2. Boomer Backlash

Whether they actually held the title "latch-key kid" or just knew kids who did, Gen X'ers know about the laissez-faire approach to childrearing. To compensate, some of us have become hands-on as Boomers were hands-off. Even those of us who haven't memorized Dr. Sears' entire library are way more involved in trying to make things go well for our kids than most Boomers were. Making matters worse, we've heard plenty from Boomers about our alleged slacker self-absorption. Who wants to be that kind of parent?

3. Crackberries

We don't exactly lead by example when it comes to winding down after dinner and getting ready for bed. Many of us need our kids asleep on time because we've got a conference call scheduled for 9 p.m., plus a dozen emails that need replies. On weeknights, our work schedules also lead us to crave time with our kids in the hours between dinner and bedtime. We haven't seen them all day, so we pack in an hour of fun. Then we're stuck with energized (and often overtired) kids who've come to expect intervention to help them fall asleep.

4. The Professionalization of Parenthood

We come to parenthood armed with unprecedented amounts of information about the raising of children – much of it grounded in science and research, some of it bogus pop psych, and all of it potentially paranoia-inducing. New parenting-related books hit the market literally daily. We're also more educated and professional than any previous generation of parents. So we micro-manage everything from work-time to bedtime.

5. Guilt

Sometimes our kids cry when we say goodbye in the morning at daycare, and sometimes they're understandably frustrated when we try to rush them through the dinner-bath-pajamas-book routine. When your child begs you to stay in his room for a just a few more minutes at night, and you didn't get many minutes together all day, it's kind of impossible to say no. Even if part of you thinks he'd be better off if you simply said goodnight.

Families sleeping most soundly seem to be those who enforced, gently in most cases, a steady set of rules about self-soothing and independent sleeping early on.

"I had a big thing with sleep from the very beginning," says Stacey Lohr Graves, a mother of four in St. Louis. "When I see these overstimulated, overcrazed kids at a mall at eight p.m. on a random Wednesday night, I'm thinking, 'Get your kid in bed.'" With each baby, she started at four months "doing that thing where you go in and pat them, and then you don't come back in." There was crying, but it never lasted long. The babies soon learned to go to sleep on their own. Today, bedtime at Graves' house is calm and smooth.

It's similar at Stacey Codlin's house, near Seattle. She and her husband Craig let their now two-year-old son, Hunter, begin crying it out around six months. "The first night was really difficult," she says. "We sat there in bed listening to him cry, and at forty-five minutes we turned on all the lights and started flipping through the **baby books** to find out what we were doing wrong." Weeks later, they tried again. "We did it for three nights. He cried forty-five minutes the first night, then twenty minutes the second night, then barely anything the third night."

It's been pretty calm ever since. Some nights, when he's done reading, he asks for more stories. But most nights "we'll put him down, and he says goodnight. He may stay awake on his own, playing with the animals in his bed, but that's all." Still, trips like their recent cross-country move can disrupt things. That's when the "crying it out" process begins all over again. Hunter, she says, may cry for an hour or two, or even much of the night.

I shudder when I hear that. Letting either of my sons cry for hours isn't something I can do. But I've come to believe that a total intolerance for a child's tears and discomfort can be really destructive.

Psychology Today editor-at-large Hara Estroff Marano says many parents have become convinced that bedtime tears must be eliminated, so they intervene constantly. Whether because of guilt or lack of time with our kids or a backlash against our own experiences being parented by hands-off Boomers, today's parents are obsessively involved in bedtime.

"Anxiety has always gone along with parenting," Marano says. "But this generation is especially anxious. They try to cram everything in, managing everything the kids are exposed to," including that most personal of experiences: sleep. The obsession with sleep management reflects the modern parental view that everything in a child's life must be managed down to the finest detail.

"So many of these people are really professional women and they're used to being in charge of things. They're results-oriented, goal-oriented," she says. "They're professionalizing every aspect of parenthood ... taking the values they have in the office and applying them at home."

In researching her new book, *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting*, Marano found parents across the country putting their kids at risk in the name of protecting them from all discomfort. "They sense that this is not good, because they were not raised this way and they turned out okay. But they are terrified to stop, because they have this singular fear that their child will be left behind."

These well-meaning parents may be doing more harm than good. Last month's issue of the journal *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* offered results of several studies on kids and sleep. Among their findings:

- Kids who slept less than others or didn't sleep through the night as preschoolers were more likely to be aggressive, have attention difficulties and be anxious or depressed as young adults.
- Infant sleep of less than twelve hours per day was associated with increased odds of becoming overweight.
- In a study of more than 1,000 children, most had later weekend bedtimes that weren't balance by any additional hours of sleep. For most, late nights on weekends start early in life and result in less overall sleep.

Another study reported in the journal specifically explored parental involvement. The researchers concluded that co-sleeping – especially when a baby is brought into the parents' bed after awakening in the night – led to higher risk of negative sleep outcomes (trouble getting to bed, less time spent sleeping, bad dreams) when the kids reached preschool. The key is consistency. That study also found that early trouble sleeping (at five through seventeen months) was the likeliest predictor of similar problems in later years. It's hard to know what that means for parents. Should we assume these particular kids are inherently problem sleepers, or is it possible that well-meant interference from mom and dad gives them little chance to learn how to self-soothe, leading logically to sleep trouble as they grow?

I could have saved those researchers the trouble of tracking nearly a thousand Canadian kids for five years. The negative consequences of my parental behaviors are apparent each night at three a.m. when my son tugs at my sleeve. "Mom, come to my bed and lie with me," he says. "Honey, you should be sleeping right now," I murmur. "And so should I." I haven't slept solidly through the night in years, except when I've been away from my kids.

So where do we go from here? At my house, we've already begun doing this differently with Wyatt, our younger son, now seventeen months. He weaned himself from nursing two months ago, and since then we've been putting him in his crib sleepy but awake. We're calm about it, and so far he either doesn't cry at all or cries for about thirty seconds after we leave. I'm not sure whether it's his temperament, our approach or a mix of the two that's making this work.

The trick will be to get our older son on track before the younger one follows his lead. Nichols says her younger son sometimes gets inspired by his older sister's resistance to bedtime and stages his own rebellion.

We're essentially using the approach Hankin recommends: Put your child in bed, read them a story or two, and then "tell them, 'In five minutes, I'm going to go downstairs and you're going to sleep.' Tell them, 'If you cry and yell and scream, that's not what we do.' And if they do it, you go and say, 'What's this about? We're here, there's nothing to worry about.' You reassure them. And then you go."

The key, she says, is consistency.

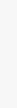
Going to sleep happily is a skill we can teach Mason. But it's also one he needs to figure out without too much interference from us. "You really can learn how to do this," I told him last night, as the clock crept past 10:30. "Just like you learned to draw pictures and use the bathroom, you can learn this."

He just smiled his million-dollar smile and said, "Okay. But, so, can I have more warm milk and raisins?"

It was hard, but I said no.

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