

Screaming to sleep, part two: The moral imperative to end cry it out

Exploring the gross misconceptions about what constitutes normal sleep patterns in infancy and early childhood

by Amy Wright Glenn

PhillyVoice contributor

Lifelong Harm

I remember the scene vividly.

I'm around 1 1/2 years old. Recently separated from my mother, my grandmother cares for me. I see myself standing in my crib at my grandparent's home. It's dark. I am crying and crying. I don't know what I did that was so wrong. I'm confused, utterly distraught. So I climb out of my crib and walk through the house. I find my grandmother in the kitchen cleaning. I cling to her leg crying, begging. I want to be picked up. "I am a good girl!" I tell her. Years later my grandmother confirms the story. She said it broke her heart to ignore my cries. She was pressured to make me cry myself to sleep by her husband, my grandfather and by her son, my biological father.

She tells me she is sorry.

- em dash here. See email.

Victoria Fedden, author of "Amateur Night at the Bubblegum Kittykat"

"For a baby, being left to cry is like torture," states Darcia Narvaez, Professor of Psychology at the University of NOTRE DAME and executive editor of the Journal of Moral Education.

Pain responses are activated when baby's are physically separated from their caregivers. This leads to the "underdevelopment" of receptors for

serotonin,

oxytocin and

endogenous opioids - chemicals essential for our experience of happiness. In particular, the neural pathways formed by oxytocin released in our infancy remain with us and continue to impact our adult physiology. When these pathways are compromised it makes forming healthy, future attachment relationships challenging at best.

Given this biological reality, Narvaez is deeply concerned about the negative impact that cry-it-out (CIO) methods of infant/toddler sleep have on children.

She warns: "When a baby's needs are dismissed or ignored, the child develops a sense of mistrust of relationships and the world. And self-confidence is undermined. The child may spend a lifetime trying to fill the resulting inner emptiness."

CIO is also painful for connected caregivers to experience. Consider the story of a new mother standing in the shower with her hands over her ears so she doesn't have to hear her daughter scream. Many parents who try CIO eventually succumb to the angels of their better nature and seek wisdom in methods that honor the basics of human physiology. Biology links mothers to children, and when relationship is in sync, cortisol levels associated with stress as well as oxytocin levels associated with bonding rise or fall together. CIO breaks this bond. True, parents can numb themselves. Like Janet and Keith, featured in part 1 of this article, caregivers can be persuaded to ignore their natural psychological urge to respond

FL
RR

to their child's cues of distress. As seen in Victoria Fedden's reflection, caregivers also can be pressured into practicing CIO.

Yet, everything in a baby's physiology links him to his caregiver. Research done by professor James McKenna at the University of Notre Dame analyzes recordings of co-sleeping, breastfeeding mothers and babies. Babies naturally turn to their mothers, not only for the nourishment of breastfeeding, but to regulate breathing, heart rate, and physiological well-being.

"Given a choice, it seems human babies strongly prefer their mother's body to solitary contact with inert, cotton-lined mattresses," writes McKenna.

To be forcibly separated from the sounds, smells and presence of the only habit a baby has ever known is frightening enough. To be ignored when cues of distress are repeated until the body physically shuts down in order to maintain self-preservation is torturous.

BT

It also has lifelong effects.

Last year, researchers from Princeton University, the University of Bristol, Columbia University and the London School of Economics and Political Science worked together to produce a report titled, "Baby Bonds: Parenting, attachment and a secure base for children." Sutton Trust, a London-based institute, funded and published the report. According to their research, forty percent of 14,000 children born in 2001 lack secure attachment bonds formed by early parental care. Children under the age of 3 who do not establish these early bonds are "more likely to be aggressive, defiant, and hyperactive as adults." All concerned about the wellbeing of our immediate future should take note of this study.

How can parents ensure that children develop secure attachment? It's simple. When a toddler cries, reassure and hold her. When a baby cries, pick him up.

Susan Campbell, a professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, comments on the above study: "When helpless infants learn early that their cries will be responded to, they also learn that their needs will be met."

This lays the necessary foundation for the development of secure attachment, upon which future emotional well-being depends. Yet, 40 percent of an upcoming generation has been harmed by misguided negligence and the abdication of sensitive and responsive parenting.

Advocates of CIO carry much of the blame.

5