

Ep #29: Transform Your Baby's Sleep and Development Through Physical Skills Like Rolling



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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One of the biggest things that can really transform your baby's sleep and their development is learning some physical skills, like rolling and things like that. And I'm going to talk to you today about how important it is and how you can help your baby learn these things. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello and welcome back to *Parenthood Prep*. I have been doing a lot of sleep training babies recently, which I love doing. And something that's so fun for me is watching them, just watching them learn these new skills.

It's almost like you can see inside their brains, and you see all these new neural pathways forming and these new connections and just these new realizations coming over their faces, like, "Wow, I can do this. I can figure out how to get to sleep. And hey, you know what? I like sleep. Sleep is great. This is awesome." It's just so cool to see.

And it's one of the things I think that they just learn so quickly. Teaching a kid how to read takes some time, you're learning different aspects of things. Teaching them different skills are these slower periods, but teaching them how to fall asleep on their own can be so quick. And it's just such an exciting change to see.

One of the big things that I have known throughout my career, that is so important and so helpful for sleep for your baby, is comfort. They have to feel comfortable. And with sleep safety, which of course is paramount, they are not that comfortable. Lying flat on their back with no ability to move around, especially early on when they've been curled up in somebody's tummy for nine months or however long, is not comfortable for them.

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So the reason your kiddo will only nap on your body is because that's where they feel the most comfortable. And a big part of helping them learn how to sleep is helping them learn how to get themselves comfortable.

What that can mean, if your baby is a little bit older, in that four- or five-, six-month range, they're out of the swaddle... Because the swaddles used to help them feel comfortable when they're newborns to sort of recreate that womb environment. But one of the things that really helps them get comfortable is rolling over. They want to be on their side or on their tummy most of the time. It's pretty rare that I meet a baby that's consistently rolling, that chooses to sleep on their back. It does happen sometimes.

I personally don't sleep flat on my back. I don't know if you do. And when I'm in a situation where I have to fall asleep that way, for example at yoga class or while getting my eyelashes done, yes, I do fall asleep in both of those situations and I'm flat on my back. I keep waking myself up because my mouth hangs open; I'm snoring.

So it is a safe position. We absolutely want to do it. We want to always put babies down on their backs. But once they are big enough and they can learn how to roll over, it is such a game changer for their sleep.

I've worked with a few parents who have an older baby that's rolling by themselves. And because they're so worried about them sleeping on their tummy, they go in and flip them back over. All that does is wake them up and stress them out.

So you want to help them cultivate this skill. There's not a pediatrician in the world who will tell you that if your baby is rolling on their own, that you are expected to sit by their side and flip them to their back every single time. Once they have the strength and the capability to roll themselves over, they are much, much safer in whatever position they get themselves into.

So that's where we want them to have that ability. We want them to develop their strength, and develop their motor skills, so that they are able to roll themselves into a position that they feel comfortable. How do we do that? Well, a big part of it is just giving them the space to learn.

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Whether that's in the crib or with sleep training, we want to put them down awake. They're going to spend some time trying to figure out how to do it. They might get halfway over and flop back. They might get to their side and decide they're comfortable there and not go over the rest of the way. They might roll into a position that seems super comfortable, and then push themselves out of it and start crying again because they don't know how they got there.

That's all part of the learning process. Sometimes the first couple of times they do it, they do it accidentally. They realize they like it and they start doing it intentionally. I'll never forget, I was sleep training a six-month old a few years ago and he was placed on his back. He was doing this thing that I call "turtling", where he was just flailing his arms and legs, crying, flailing, not doing anything to try to help himself.

And that's where, after a while of letting them try this independently, I would intervene. And thank God these people had quite a big house because I was downstairs watching him on the monitor and I saw him turtling. He's just flailing with his arms and legs. I'm like, "Okay, well, this kid isn't figuring it out. I have to do something. I have to pick him up. I have to help him."

By the time I got up the stairs to his room, he had figured out how to flip himself over, wiggled his butt in the air, grabbed his pacifier and was practically asleep. And that's all it took, was that second where he decided, "Okay, I'm not just going to scream and flail. I'm going to actually try this." He rolled over, butt in the air, put that pacifier in his mouth, and he was happy as a clam. He went from a turtle to a clam, and he fell asleep. It was so great to see.

Now, sometimes it's actually not that simple. I sleep trained a little girl a few years ago. Again, she was about five months old and she was rolling. So we put her in the crib on her back and she rolled and rolled and rolled. Sometimes we put them down awake, they play for a while or they're quiet, and they don't necessarily start crying. So we don't have to think about when and how, or if we're going to intervene.

But she rolled and rolled, she seemed totally content, and then she started crying. She was crying and crying and she had stopped rolling, and I was like, "Huh?" After a few minutes of that, I was like, "This is interesting." What I

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realized was that we had set her in the middle of the crib so her body was long ways, sort of parallel to the longer side of the crib.

She had rolled herself all the way to the edge, but she wasn't rolling back. And I was like... She's five months, maybe she was even four and a half. She's on the younger side... "Maybe she can't roll herself the other direction, and that's why. She got up against the side of the crib and got stuck, and now she's uncomfortable."

So I went in and I took her, just very quickly, I didn't make a big deal about it. But I just lifted her up and I put her at the short end of the crib so that now her body's parallel to the short end, and I put her all the way to whatever direction she could roll away from. And sure enough, as soon as I moved her, she rolled and rolled and rolled about halfway down the crib, finally found a comfortable position, and then she was totally calm and she fell asleep.

In that case, it was like, "Okay, yes, she can roll, but she couldn't do the whole package of being able to roll in both directions," I did intervene and I helped her. Now, does that mean that she never learned how to roll the other direction? Of course not. Having that space in the crib while she was awake, either falling asleep or when she woke up, gave her the opportunity to really figure out how to roll both ways. But in that moment, I was like, "Oh, let me just see if I can help you."

So that's two examples of them doing it in the crib. But something we also really want to do, something I really do with my clients when I'm there staying with them, is cultivate that skill and that ability during the day when they're awake, when they're doing playtime.

When they're up from a nap or just calm, they've been fed, they're feeling good, put them on the floor. Just lay them down on the floor. Take away the play gym that goes over their face, what I call "baby television". It's not a bad thing, it's good. But when they start to get older and we want them to do physical things, if they have exciting stuff happening over their face while they're lying down, they're not going to be motivated to roll. So get rid of the things hanging over their face.

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And don't you hang over their face. You get to their side. Put some toys, some interesting things around to the side, maybe a book or a black-and-white photo or a black-and-white card or some toys, like I said, whatever, and help them see that those things are there and get motivated.

It's honestly... Not to scare you, but there is an epidemic of kids in this country with flatheads; having to have helmets. Torticollis, which means they can't move their neck properly. Their neck muscles get overly tight. And these are normal kids. This isn't just babies with special needs or preemies or whatever.

And yes, it's partly because we're putting them on their backs to sleep, but it's also because they're stuck on their backs all day long with stuff happening over their face. Every time they make a fuss, every time they make a peep, we're like, "Oh, here, you want this toy? You want this?" Or we move them to a chair and we sit them in front of the television.

They're not having any need to use their body, so then their heads are getting flat because they're in the same position all the time. Their necks are getting stiff. And we want to prevent that.

If you see that's something that's happening in your baby, it can be pretty quickly fixable if you just are aware of it and you say, "Okay, now we're going to start having you move in the other direction. We're going to have you roll this way. When I'm feeding you, rather than having you always turn to the same side, I'm going to feed you so that you have to turn your neck the other way. I'm going to hold you on the opposite side."

Something that, just as a side note, is helpful about body feeding is that when you're switching breasts, the baby is just naturally moving their body in a different way, switching their body in a different way. But when we bottle feed, we tend to hold the baby with the same hand and use our dominant hand to bottle feed. Does that mean we shouldn't bottle feed? Of course not. Absolutely bottle feed. I love it.

But you want to work on giving them different positions. Maybe hold the bottle a little bit more outward, hold them sitting up, hold them different ways so that they're getting to use these muscles.

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When we're just sitting next to them on their play mat and we're just like, "Oh, here's your toy. Here's this... Here's that... I'm going to sing songs to you," and whatever, they're not getting that frustration that motivates them to move. So you really want to give them opportunities to do that.

And something that I do, that I call "rolling bootcamp", is I will help them just a little. So thinking about going from laying on your back to laying on your side or laying on your stomach, it takes a lot of effort to get your whole body to lift off the ground and move in that way, especially if you're kind of a chubby baby.

I will sometimes help them just a little bit. I'll let them grab my finger, or I'll kind of hold their hand and I'll pull them up to a 45° angle, or even a 90° angle, or maybe just a little less than that, and let them do the work of getting the rest of the way over. But it takes patience. I'm not pulling them all the way. I know it's so tempting to do that, but I'm just going to sit there and let them hold onto my finger, "I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying," and then whoop they do it. It's amazing to see.

So you want to have that patience. You want to trust the process of having them practice a little bit. Then, as they start getting faster and better with that, I'm going to hold them a little less. Maybe I'm not going to hold their finger at all. Maybe I'm just going to hold their hand while they're on their back, to just prompt them a little bit to do the next steps in rolling over.

That's when we want to sit there and really focus on learning the skill. Which you don't have to do all the time, it's fine to just leave them on the play mat and let them play and let them sort it out on their own. But that's where they're going to learn everything. That's where they're going to learn sitting up, army crawling, walking.

They're going to learn all that by being independent on the floor and not being strapped to a chair or strapped to your body or being held or whatever. Again, doesn't mean you can never put your baby in a chair or hold them or this or that. But think about, are they getting time during the day when they're in that green zone, where they can just be and just move their bodies?

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And maybe that's in the crib. Maybe you have a baby who is sleep trained and who's putting themselves to sleep and they're spending some time in the crib rolling around, playing, learning how to sit up, learning how to crawl.

Something that's funny is a baby who's sleeping, they'll be sleeping through the night no problem, suddenly they start crawling and it's taking them an hour to fall asleep because they're loving just crawling around the crib. Or they're waking up in the middle of the night and the parents see them on the monitor just crawling around the crib, and they're like, "Oh, is that okay? Is that fine? Are they allowed to do that?" Yeah, it's fine. Soon, the novelty will wear off and they'll go back to just sleeping.

But learning this rolling skill, you might see them rolling, rolling, rolling everywhere in the crib. Now, if they get wedged in a corner and you feel like they're stuck, should you go in right away and fix them? No, you should give them some space. But eventually you may want to just give them a little bit of assistance, just minimal assistance, to get them unstuck. But most of the time they're able to figure it out for themselves.

So putting your babies on the floor from really pretty early on... I mean, I wouldn't say necessarily the first week, but once they're comfortable with it, start doing that tummy time. Put them down on the ground. Let them lift their heads. Let them practice just being on their tummy. When they're little, sometimes they're going to fall asleep that way.

If you keep a very close eye on them, you can let them sleep that way while you're supervising them. You don't have to necessarily flip them over. If they're lying on your chest, if you're on the couch or on your bed and they're lying on your chest, on their tummy, that counts as tummy time too. And if they're falling asleep that way, that's fine. But don't have that be the only way they're ever doing that. Because we want to give them the space to learn those skills, we get a little frustrated.

And that's really what it's all about. Now, if they're red line, hysterical screaming because they're hungry and tired and overstimulated, and you're trying to get them to roll over, don't do that. Wait until they're in the green zone. But take advantage of those opportunities.

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Like first thing in the morning. One of my favorite things to do with a baby is bring them downstairs. Get them up, bring them downstairs, take their diaper off, put them on a burp cloth or a towel in case they pee, let them get some air-out time on their butt, and do some tummy time and some playing around on the floor. It's a great opportunity to do that.

You don't have to have them be diaper free. I just like it because it lets them air out after being in a kind of wet diaper all night. But whatever you want to do, it's fine.

So yeah, don't be afraid to give your kids a little space to learn how to move their bodies, get that exercise, stretch, move, release things that they have had, tense or trapped, and do it with them. Have them do yoga with you, whatever. Or do something else while they're doing that.

Have a great day.

Alright, listen up, folks. We love to joke around but it's time to get real. And that real talk, it's all about giving your babies the roasting they deserve. Yep, you heard it right. We're calling for an epic Baby Roast.

We want you to drop a voice note on our website and call out your little ones for their adorable crimes. Did your baby spit up on your brand-new dress the second you put it on? Maybe they decided to scream through your sister's wedding vows? We want to hear all the juicy details.

Head over to HappyFamilyAfter.com, or hit the link in the show notes. Every page on the site has a button on the side for you to record straight from your phone. Your story might just make it onto an episode of the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. We can't wait to hear.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Parenthood Prep*. If you want to learn more about the services Devon offers, as well as access her free monthly newborn care webinars, head on over to www.HappyFamilyAfter.com.