

## Ep #32: Are Sleep Associations Really Bad for Your Baby?



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Devon Clement**

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If you have spent any time reading about or researching baby sleep, you probably have heard the term “sleep association”. What does it mean? Is it good? Is it bad? Do we want them? Do we not want them? How do we get rid of them if we have ones that we don't want? Stay tuned, and I'm going to tell you all about it.

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 the *Parenthood Prep* podcast.

Today, we're going to be talking about sleep, one of my favorite topics, if you're not sick of hearing about it from me already. I think it's something that parents talk about more than, or at least the same amount, as they talk about poop. Every parent says, “I'm not going to talk about my kid's poop,” and then you end up talking about your kid's poop all the time.

But you also talk a lot about your kid's sleep. And maybe it's because you're struggling and you want to make a change. Or maybe because it's great and you want to make the other parents jealous.

I think that there are just so many questions about it. People always just want to research and learn, and there's just so much out there to read. I'll talk to potential clients or parents that are asking me questions or people I'm working with, and they sound like an encyclopedia of baby sleep information. It's great.

It's great that there's so much information out there and people do such a good job researching it. But I think it can also be kind of hard to put into practice, especially if you've never done this before and it's your first time.

So I want to talk about today's sleep associations. What are they? It is probably a term that you've heard. And more than likely, it's something that you've heard that is a bad thing. We don't want our kids to be too hooked on certain things.

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Like a lot of people are afraid of the pacifier. We don't want to give them the pacifier because then they'll just want it all the time and it will be so hard to break the habit.

And, really, so many things are very individual, very nuanced, very gray areas, not black and white. What sleep associations are okay? What are not okay? They're not universally bad. And I'm going to talk about that today.

We all have sleep associations. When we think about it with a baby, we think about they might be associated with being rocked to sleep, or being fed to sleep with a bottle or nursed to sleep. They may be used to bouncing on a yoga ball, or walked around the room, or having the white noise or the shushing, or they might need the pacifier.

So they have all these different sleep associations, but we have them too. So think about what you need to fall asleep. You need a bed. You need a pillow and blanket. I'm kind of particular. I need the right kind of blanket. I need it to have a little weight to it. I need it to be very cozy. I need the temperature to be good. I need my pillow to be comfortable and supportive. I hate when you stay at a hotel and the pillows look so amazing and they're so fluffy, and then you lay on them for 30 minutes and they're flat as a pancake. What is that about?

Anyway, we have these sleep associations. Could you fall asleep on the floor with no pillow and no blanket? Probably. Would it take a lot longer and would you probably not sleep nearly as well? Yes. You might doze off on the couch. You might doze off in the car when someone else is driving. You might fall asleep on a plane, but it's not the same kind of sleep that you get in your bed, with your pillow, in your room where you're familiar with everything.

Have you ever been sleeping, staying over at someone's house or at a hotel and you just wake up in the middle of the night and you're like, "Where am I?" That is because your brain has these sleep associations. And for a second, when you wake up, it's like, "Wait, where are my familiar things? Where am I? What's going on?" And you're shocked.

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You're falling asleep in your bed with your pillow and your blanket, everything's familiar, the street noise is the same or the outside noise is the same, or the silence is the same, and then you wake up in the middle of the night and you're not in your bed anymore. You're in the bathtub and you're like, "What the heck? What happened? How did this happen? How did I end up here?" And you start freaking out.

So when your baby, who has a sleep association of falling asleep in your arms, and wakes up in there in the crib, they're going to freak out. But that doesn't mean that sleep associations are bad. It just means we want them to have the right ones. We want them to have sleep associations that are going to continue on throughout the night. They're going to continue on throughout their life.

When they're used to falling asleep with a nipple in their mouth, whether it's a bottle or a human nipple or pacifier, and they wake up and that's gone, they're like, "Why is my mouth empty? Where's my nipple? Where's my food?"

So a lot of the time, when parents think their baby is hungry all night long because they want to feed multiple times, it's not necessarily that they actually need the food. And trust me, I have seen some extremely chunky babies who absolutely would be fine to go the entire night without a feed eating every hour, every two hours, every three hours overnight.

Because every time they go through a lighter sleep cycle, the only way that they can fall back asleep is with a nipple in their mouth. And just as a note to that, I've discussed this before, if they're used to eating multiple times a night, all night, and consuming a lot of calories all night, they may very well be hungry because it is now their routine to eat around the clock.

So they are not consuming enough calories during the day, because they know they're going to consume all those calories overnight. So if you think, "Well, yeah, but she's actually hungry." She probably is, but that doesn't mean you can't shift it. You can't make a change. It doesn't have to be cold turkey. You don't have to do it all at once. We can talk about cutting out night feedings on another podcast.

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But generally, if their association is the only way they ever fall asleep, with some kind of nipple in their mouth or being fed, then that's the only way they're going to be able to fall back to sleep. If their association is they're falling asleep in your arms, cuddling with you, rocking in a chair, bouncing on a ball, when they wake up in the middle of the night, you're going to have to go in and do that again.

The pacifier, they fall asleep with the pacifier in, that's great. A lot of babies love it. They have a high need to suck. It organizes their nervous system; another buzzword we love to talk about. But if it falls out, and it often does when they're in a deep sleep, and then they wake up and that pacifier is gone, you have to go in and be paci patrol and put it back in.

Now, I don't think that going in and popping in a pacifier, when your baby's three or four months old, if it takes two seconds and then you are right back to sleep, especially if your baby's next to you in a bassinet next to your bed, that's not the end of the world. You might find that you don't mind that. You might find that you do mind that and it's every hour and it's annoying.

Generally, I'd say around six months, maybe seven months, they're able to manage that on their own. And if you listen to my other episode about rolling and physical skills, learning how to manage the pacifier is also one of those physical skills we really want to work on with them. Because if they wake up in the middle of the night and that pacifier is gone, and they can find it and grab it and put it back in their mouth, then grand. Cool. I didn't have to get involved.

So here's my rule for sleep associations. If it is something that does not require the intervention of another person in order to support, it's fine. White noise is a fine sleep association. You put the white noise machine on at the beginning of the night and it stays on.

If you have that stupid, creepy shusher thing... it's this device that goes shh, shh, shh. God, I hate it. I hate it... use white noise. Just use white noise. Get the right tone of white noise. Pink noise is really popular. There are great apps for it. You do not need the shusher, especially since it doesn't stay on all night and it's weird. That is an intervention that's fine. You can take that with you when you travel.

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If your baby wears a sleep sack, or if it's in those early days and they're wearing a swaddle, that's totally fine. We can have that sleep association because it's something that you put on in the middle of the night. You don't have to go in and change their sleep sack during the night. They can just have that on throughout the night.

If they're used to feeding to sleep, if they're used to being held and it's not something that's going to carry on through the night, and it's going to require your intervention to help them with, then that's a sleep association that we want to try to eliminate and create a new sleep association in its place.

For travel, they're not necessarily going to have their same crib, but you can really recreate their sleep environment at home when you're traveling. You can make sure that the room or the space that they're in is dark. You can make sure that you bring the sleep sack they're used to, the white noise they're used to.

If it's a comparable sized crib, if it's a standard crib that they're going to be staying in at a family member's house or something, bring their sheet from their crib that they've been sleeping on. Bring that kind of dirty sheet because it will smell like home. It will smell like the sheet they're used to sleeping on, even a fresh clean one from home.

But the one that they've used for a couple of nights, as long as obviously it's not disgusting, bring that with you and then it'll just smell more familiar and they'll get more comfortable. Don't do that if it's not going to fit right on the crib mattress and it's going to end up loose and potentially become an issue. But if it's the same size crib, those are the sleep associations that we like.

And just think about that. Like I said in the beginning, if you fell asleep in your bed and you woke up in the bathtub, you'd be freaked out. If you're two and a half years old and you fall asleep with mom lying in bed next to you, or dad reading you a story or rubbing your back, and then they sneak out after you're sleep and you wake up in the middle of the night and they're gone, what are you going to do?

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Of course you're going to freak out, run down the hall, go in their room, and look for them. Or cry until they come in and lay down with you again to fall back asleep. Because that is their sleep association.

So when we create new sleep associations like, "We're going to read you a story and then we're going to say goodnight. And then you're going to fall asleep all by yourself," then that's great. Then, when they wake up in the middle of the night and they're all by themselves, they're like, "Oh yeah, I'm used to this. This is familiar. My sleep association is to fall asleep all by myself. And so when I wake up in the middle of the night, I don't panic."

And it's the same thing with a little baby. If they're falling asleep on their own in the crib, then when they wake up in the middle of the night, they're going to have a much easier time going back to sleep because they know where they are. They feel comfortable. They know how to get themselves comfortable and put themselves back to sleep. They know how to find that pacifier.

Hey, pro tip on that, by the way, put 10 pacifiers in the crib. Put them all around in a circle, like a witch spell. Put them all around them so that no matter where they end up in the crib, they're able to find a pacifier.

I had a sleep training client years ago who, when I suggested that... her baby was like eight months or something... she was like, "Oh, I go in and find the pacifier for her during the night when it's gotten to the other side of the crib because it's dark and she can't find it for herself." I'm like, "Give her a lot. Give her six. Give her 10." She's like, "I just never even thought of that."

And then, that night, the baby found the extra pacifiers and put them in her mouth and went to sleep. It was actually funny. She sent me a picture in the morning and the baby had three pacifiers in each hand. She was so happy. It was riches beyond belief.

But yeah, just think about stuff like that. How can I make this part of the process easier for my baby? Those sleep associations, what can we add, take away, change, to create a sleep environment that is replicable? That we can do in different places when we travel, different things like that, and that does not rely

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on an adult to intervene, to reestablish those interventions, those associations during the night?

It's pretty simple. It's actually pretty easy. And I think it makes a huge, huge difference. So let me know on Instagram what you think. We are doing a weekly podcast episode discussion on our Instagram @happyfamilyafter.

I look forward to seeing you there. Bye.

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](http://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](http://www.HappyFamilyAfter.com).