

Ep #62: Sleep Training Success: No Snoo, No Pacifier, Just Sweet Sleep



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Have you ever been curious what sleep training a baby actually looks like? Today, I'm going to walk you through a real-life sleep training experience and see what you think.

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. This episode is coming out a little late because I was sleep training last week. I was working with a baby. I do that less than I used to. I used to work like three weeks out of the month, but I've been fortunate the last few years to only do it like once a month or so. But I love it. I love doing it. I love staying with families, and I love getting their baby sleeping and getting their whole routine on track and just making life easier for everyone.

Sometimes it's a baby. I know I told you guys last month I was with two or, no, a couple of months ago, I was with two older kids, a 3-year-old and a 6-year-old. We got their bedtime routine down. We got them staying in bed overnight. So, at any point, people that are having issues can call us and we'll straighten them out. Or if you're having issues, I want to encourage you that they are fixable and that you can always make a difference. People will ask me, "Is my baby too old to sleep train? Am I too late?" I mean, it's never too late, right? It's also never too early.

A couple of our family members are having babies currently, which is very exciting. And Alex's cousin is having a baby next month, and we were on a family Zoom call last night, and she was like, "When should I do sleep training? Like 3-4 months?" And I said, "Honestly, you can really start very early with creating good habits. You can always do something, unless, I guess, there's some sort of major growth issue or whatever. Or like in the first 2 weeks, you

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just want to be feeding and getting that weight up and getting used to life on the outside and all that. But there's always something that you can do."

So, I want to actually walk you guys through how this went because it was a pretty textbook sleep training, and I wanted to just share about it. So, the first night, I met the family, I met the baby, and I said, "When was his last nap? What are the goals for when his bedtime is going to be?" and all that. So, we decided that based on when his last nap was and what our goals were when he was waking up in the morning and all that, that we were going to go for a 7:00 bedtime.

So, we put him down pretty soon after I arrived, and he actually went straight to sleep. He had been sleeping in a Snoo and had it on with the rocking motion and the swaddle. And they had been putting him down awake, but the Snoo had been rocking him to sleep. So, he went to sleep. Now, I'm always a little skeptical when a baby falls straight to sleep without much drama on the first bedtime because I always feel like we're just setting the stage for them to wake up after one sleep cycle and then for it to really kick off.

So, and that's exactly what happened. He slept about 30 minutes, and then he was awake for a while, for about 90 minutes. And what he was doing during that time was he was fussing, he was crying. He was never hysterical. He was never so upset that we didn't think that he was going to be able to calm down. I went in and checked on him a few times when he was crying hard, but mostly when he was just fussing and kind of laying there, we left him alone. He did eventually fall back asleep.

What I typically see with that first bedtime, or in this case, the first wake-up of the night, because I think he did treat that first put down as a little bit of a nap, is that they are going to kind of be the most dramatic that we're going to see. But what also happens during this time is that they learn a lot of skills. So, at 4 months old, in the Snoo, you're restrained, you're swaddled, your arms are held in place. He was using a pacifier. So, he was used to having his arms swaddled

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in. This wasn't his first time without the swaddle, but he hadn't had much experience without the swaddle.

So, really, he was just kind of keeping his arms down. He was maybe moving them a little bit, but he wasn't moving his body very much, which was interesting to see. And what happened over the course of our time together is that he really started learning those physical skills. So, if we had run in when he started crying and given him the pacifier, re-swaddled him, picked him up, held him, rocked him back to sleep, he would not have had the opportunity to start learning these physical skills.

So once he went back to sleep, he actually had a pretty good first night. He slept a long stretch. He would fuss here and there. We did do a dream feed because he was kind of back into doing one feed overnight after not having done that, because that's some of that 3-4 month, they call it the 4-month sleep regression, but it really starts at 3 months, where they start wanting to feed more during the night. And that happens for a variety of reasons.

Partly, I think that they around that age get so much more playful and engaged and involved during the day, like between 3 and 4 months, they get so interested in the world around them, and they just are more distracted when they're eating, so they don't eat as well. There's also some growth spurts and some developmental leaps happening, so they start asking for more feeding during the night. So he had been feeding overnight, so we did do a dream feed.

So he was up here and there, nothing major. And then he woke up for the day a little on the early side, like about 6:00 a.m. And we left him for a little while, and then we just got him and we started the day, partly because we thought he might be hungry because he had been used to eating during the night and waking up and eating pretty early in the morning.

So that was fine. Then the first day, we started putting him down awake for naps. He was going down pretty easily for his naps, but he was taking very short naps. So, about one sleep cycle, which is 40 minutes, sometimes 30 minutes. We did see him go back to sleep a little bit when we left him for that first nap to

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go back to sleep, but it was pretty restless. The first day of sleep training, we're really just working on that initial put down. Are they putting themselves to sleep? And we don't love short naps in the long term, but one sleep cycle is plenty at that point.

Now, was he extra tired? Honestly, not really, because he was still getting a decent amount of naps, but sometimes they are a little extra tired during the sleep training process. And as much as I will tell you time and again, don't let your young baby get too overtired. When you're sleep training, sometimes it's inevitable. And sometimes we have to make that decision. Are we going to force a nap by holding them or putting them in the stroller or doing something that they're really going to sleep well? Or are we going to just keep going and let them be a little extra tired? And in that case, we let him be a little extra tired.

So then the next night, putting him down for bed, we put him down again at around 7:00 because that made sense with his schedule, and that was the goal for bedtime. It took him a while to fall asleep, and he did some pretty intense crying. And I would go check on him, and he would be fine. He would calm down as soon as he saw me and he was fine. Now, one thing that he was starting to do during this time was he was trying to suck on his hands. He was trying to get his fingers into his mouth to replace the pacifier and use that as a tool.

Why did I take the pacifier? Because frankly, at 4 months, they just are not old enough to manage it on their own. They just can't get it if it falls out. And so I feel like it's frustrating for both the baby and the parents and kind of tortures them to give them the pacifier, and then as soon as they lose it, they can't get it back. If they're 6 months or older, I suggest throwing a bunch of pacifiers in the crib and letting them just figure it out for themselves, find it on their own. But at 4 months, they're not really capable of doing that. So we're going to help them either to learn how to live without it, or they're going to start sucking on their hands. But of course, he wasn't very coordinated. He didn't have a lot of practice.

So he would start sucking on his hands, he would get frustrated, his arm would fall out of his mouth. He would, all we heard was this like slurping sound,

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watching him on the monitor, trying to suck his hands. So he had a bit of a tougher time going down. But again, not a lot of very long sustained crying, a lot of just trying things, trying things, and then going back to sleep.

The mom actually said, which I thought was great. I've never thought about it this way. She saw me observing him on the monitor, and she's like, "Wow, this is like watching water boil." And it really is. Like, I wouldn't say it's like watching paint dry because you can't really see the paint drying, but it is like you have to have a lot of patience to watch the bubbles start to form. And you know what it's kind of like is watching the water boil while someone is like turning the heat up and down randomly because the baby's trying to figure out what they're doing. They're taking breaks, they're getting closer and closer.

Sometimes when they're learning how to roll, I say it's like watching sports. Like, you watch them like kind of start to get up onto their side and you're like, "Yes, okay, here we go. Here we go, here we go." And then they flop onto their back and you're like, "Oh, no." And then they do it again. It's like watching a soccer game where they're like, they kick towards the goal and it's good. Ah! Or they miss. Oh, you know. But as they get better and better, they start being more and more consistent.

So, then he fell asleep, slept for 4 hours. Then he was up for a while. He was up in the middle of the night for over an hour. And I was watching him on the monitor, and I was listening to him, and he was just trying to suck his hands and getting so frustrated. But I did not throw in the towel and say, "Oh, let me just give you the pacifier," because I could tell that he was learning a new skill and that he was really working on it. And it's also relevant to note that I was here to sleep train the baby. I am not the parent. I did not have to get up the next day and go to work. I didn't have to take care of other kids. All I had to do was observe this baby, intervene if I felt like intervention was needed, but really just give him space to figure out what it was going to take for him to fall back asleep on his own. So, he eventually did go back to sleep, slept for a while, but he was up again at 6:00. So, at that point, I left him a little bit. He didn't go back to sleep, so we got him up and we started the day kind of early.

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The next day, we had a similar experience with the naps, but a lot less fussing, a lot less crying. He really went straight to sleep for his naps. And I don't know if it was because he was a little extra tired. He only got about 9.5 hours total of sleep, which is very low for his age. But again, when we are doing an intensive sleep training process, we are less worried about their total amount of sleep than them learning the skills to fall asleep and get back to sleep. So, the first nap on the second day, he fell asleep really quickly, woke up at that 30-minute mark, that one sleep cycle, but he was kind of quiet in the crib for a few minutes, and he ended up going back to sleep for an hour and 20 minutes. So, he had close to a 2-hour nap that second day, which was amazing. This was a baby who was taking very short naps before we started working together.

Then we put him down for the next nap. He slept 40 minutes, one sleep cycle, left him for a while. He fussed a bunch, didn't really go back to sleep. Then the third nap, which I was going to call the last nap of the day, he ended up taking a really short nap. So, at that point, I was like, "Okay, we're at the end of the day. I don't want him to be up for so long with only such a short nap." So, I took him out for a walk, and he did have a snooze in the stroller, which is okay to do when you feel like they really need a little bit of a catch-up, or you just don't want a cranky, miserable baby for 3 hours until bedtime.

So, I did let him get a little bit of a catch-up stroller nap, and it was totally fine. However, I think it may have been a little late because he had a harder time with bedtime on that third night. Now, his stroller nap was 5:15 to 5:45. We put him down at like 7:30 because I figured 5:45, that's not a great wake window. We're actually going to do an episode about wake windows. Even at 4 months, towards the end of the day, they really need like 90 minutes or 2 hours if they are pretty well rested generally.

So, he had a really hard time falling asleep that first night. And I actually went in and I did a check on him, and I kind of gave him a little bit of a reset because he was pretty upset. So, I kind of took him out of the crib. I actually like woke him up a little bit and was like, "Hey, everything's cool. We're going to just like start fresh with putting you back down in the crib." This is something that I would

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really not recommend parents do because it can be really tricky to get it right. But I did sort of want to just break the cycle of him like just sort of crying and crying because he wasn't really trying anything.

I put him back down in the crib. Now, this is important. Put him, I set him back down. I'm like, "Good night." I walk away. I go into the bathroom because I had to pee, came out, looked at the monitor, he had rolled to his tummy. Just like that. Now, I had been practicing rolling with him during the day. We had been doing some practicing rolling, but we did not see him actually doing it on his own. I was just doing it with support with him, and he just did it, just like that. It was incredible. We were blown away.

So then he slept really, really well because once they're rolling onto their tummies by themselves, they get so comfortable so quickly. He slept about 6 hours for that stretch, fussed a little bit, slept another hour, fussed a little bit, slept another 2 hours, fussed a little bit, woke up at 6:40, which is a big change for him. So we got him right away. And he was still definitely tired. So he was ready to go back down for that first nap. But I wanted to keep him up. Prior to this, we had been really keeping him up till about 8:30 because we didn't want to start the day super early.

And I'll talk about this when I talk about wake windows, but what ends up happening when you start the day super early is that the whole day pulls early. They wake up at 6:00, they're going down for their first nap at 7:00, 7:30, and then it's just like they're done with naps by 3:00 p.m. And how are we going to get them to a 7:00 bedtime? And you end up with a baby that, and this is reasonable if you want to do it, is on like a 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. I've even known families that were on 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. schedules. You have to be a special kind of person to want to be awake at 5:00 in the morning. And there are people like that out there. I know people like that. I am not that girl.

I do not want to be up for the day at 5:00 a.m. But if you do, have your baby on a 5 to 5 schedule. I don't care, but don't do it just because they are waking up super early and you're putting them down for naps early and you're pulling the

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whole day early. So we did keep him up. We put him down at 8:30. He didn't fall asleep right away, or he fell asleep right away, but he didn't roll right away. So I was like, "Oh, maybe it was just a fluke." Nope. 30 minutes in, he hit that like little sleep cycle change over wake window, rolled onto his belly and went back to sleep and ended up sleeping over 2 hours, which was amazing. We were so happy to see it.

What happens with sleep training is that as they learn the skill of falling asleep more easily on their own, they're able to go back to sleep when their sleep gets disrupted, whether it's because of the sleep cycle change or because of a noise they hear or just because of anything that happens. I've worked with a lot of babies where when I get there, initially the parents are like, "Oh, she's such a light sleeper. She won't go back to sleep. Anything disturbs her, so we have to be so quiet." I don't want to be so precious about not making noise, not doing anything.

Now, I love white noise, especially in an apartment because I think it really does keep the outside sounds down. Like who's not going to wake up if you drop a pot on the floor while you're cooking dinner or your 2-year-old is running around banging on the walls or something like that because they're hyper before their bedtime. So I don't want to be overly precious, but you do want to be a little bit considerate of the baby's sleep. And what we find as they start to get to be better and better sleepers is that they are not disturbed by these little sounds, these little things that previously would wake them up because they have the ability to go right back to sleep.

I say this all the time. It's the whole foundation of sleep. Once you have that skill of falling back asleep on your own, you are able to do it really easily. That's why as adults, if we wake up in the middle of the night, we should not be picking up our phones, picking up our iPads, doing anything that's going to really get us woken up. We're going to try to go back to sleep as quickly as possible.

So then he had a second great nap, woke up at the 40-minute mark, but he did go back to sleep. And then another short nap. And then I took him out for a walk

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thinking he would not sleep in the stroller, but he was starting to be pretty cranky and tired. And it's interesting because at this point, he had more sleep than he had gotten. He got 10 hours at night. He had close to 4 hours of naps, which is really approaching what we like to see for a baby this age, 3.5 to 4.5 hours of naps, sometimes even 5 if their night is a little shorter. And instead of being his usual chipper, sunny self that he was that he typically was even as a tired baby, he was starting to seem really cranky and tired.

And at this point, you might think, "Well, Devon, like the sleep training is obviously not working. He's in such worse shape than he was." But what I will say to you is this means it is working because when a baby is not sleeping enough, when they are not getting longer naps, when they are waking up multiple times a night or having a short night, and their overall sleep total is very low, they're running on adrenaline. I call it baby coffee.

So, when you're exhausted and you drink a cup of coffee and it like wakes you up and makes you a little hyper, but you're still tired underneath all that. Like maybe you're not falling asleep at your desk. Maybe you couldn't fall asleep even if you tried, but you can tell that your brain is still tired. So, these babies are running on adrenaline and cortisol, which is notable. And that's why they seem to be in a good mood even when they're exhausted.

And when we start sleep training them and they start getting better and better sleep, they end up being a little tired and grubby for a few days. And a lot of times the parents will tell me they're getting sleep for the first time in months and they're feeling so much more tired and groggy. And why is that? Because they're finally sleeping. It's because your body does not just get used to sleeping well all of a sudden.

You know, it's like if you ate nothing but greasy fried food all the time and then suddenly you switch to a diet of all kale. Your body would have to adjust to digesting a different type of food. Even though on the surface, kale is like quote-unquote healthier than, you know, fried food. I don't like assigning values to food at all. I think food is food. Also, side note, because this randomly came up last

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night in conversation, that book and movie Super Size Me, all about how the guy ate nothing but McDonald's for however many months and got super unhealthy. The thing that nobody talks about is that he also was only getting 4 hours of sleep a night. He was purposely under sleeping and under exercising.

Like he was basically eating McDonald's, sitting in a chair, and only getting 4 hours of sleep. And we blame the diet 100% for his health outcomes. But what we don't talk about is how little sleep and how that can affect your health outcomes so much. So, get enough sleep. It's funny because I also read an article a bunch of years ago about the owner, like the president, the CEO of one of those West Coast fast food companies. I don't remember it was like Jack in the Box or Carl's Jr. or something like that. This guy eats like a big double cheeseburger every day for lunch, but he also gets exercise.

And I assume gets a normal amount of sleep because it didn't say that he was purposely under sleeping himself. And he's healthy as can be as like an older, I mean this was like, I don't know, 15 years ago, so he's probably not alive anymore or whatever. But the point is, sleep is as important as diet and exercise to your health. So, rant side note over. The baby was starting to get a little grumpy because he was getting enough sleep that he wasn't running on adrenaline anymore.

The last night, we put him down early, and once again, he had kind of a tough bedtime. I think it was because he had that nap in the stroller, and even though we put him down at the 2-hour mark, he just was not quite ready to go to sleep. He ended up falling asleep on his back, which I was worried about because I was like, "Oh my gosh, now he's been rolling. He rolled for every nap except the last nap. He has somehow forgotten how to do it or something changed and he's not doing it anymore."

Also, I want to say that even on his back, he was doing a much better job sucking his hands, getting his fingers in his mouth, which he wanted, he wanted to do. He had a need to suck. Babies need to suck. Some more than others. It organizes their like sensory processing. It's really good for them. So, if they

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really need to suck and they want to suck their thumb or whatever, I'm not going to stop them. It is, yes, it's a habit you're going to have to break down the road. Some babies just break it on their own. But if they're going to do it, they're going to do it. You can't really like take it away at this age.

So, he fell asleep on his back. He slept most of the night. He was up incredibly briefly at 4:00 a.m. Quiet, no issues, went right back to sleep. He was on his back the whole night. And he slept 11 hours, which was amazing. We love to see that. We love to see 11 hours of sleep.

I keep this log in an Excel spreadsheet and I color code it, and you can just see. I love seeing the amount of the color of sleep increase night after night and the red and the yellow, which red is crying and yellow is like fussing or quiet but awake, go down. The fourth day, he had absolutely perfect naps. First nap was 2 hours, second nap was 2 hours. He did roll, I think for the second nap. He did roll, so we saw that he had that skill.

I actually, when he was awake in between his naps, I brought him back to playing on the play mat, practicing rolling, get keeping that skill up because just because they do something once or twice doesn't mean that it is a skill that they have solidly. They need to keep practicing. Like when they're teeny tiny and maybe you're nursing and you introduce the bottle, you give them one bottle and you're like, "Okay, great, they took the bottle." And then you try it again 3 weeks later and suddenly they refuse the bottle. You have to keep up the routine. You have to keep it consistent. So, same thing with rolling.

We were giving him lots of chances to roll during the day. But it was also really encouraging to me that he could sleep either on his back or his belly and sleep really well. So, he had two great 2-hour naps. The last nap was after I left, his parents put him down. He would not sleep, which is fine. They just pulled him and they put him down to bed. And since then, he's been working really hard on solidifying the naps, solidifying the overnights. He's been sleeping through the night. I don't actually know if he's been on his back or on his tummy. I have confidence that he can really do either.

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And just seeing how much he started using his arms, started kicking his legs, started moving around in the crib. After being swaddled and being in a bassinet, whether it's the Snoo or another bassinet, babies kind of don't realize that they can move. My colleague said it's like they're, they have lead in their diaper. They need to get the idea that now they have this freedom. Now they can move around. They can figure stuff out. And at first, it's going to be challenging. Like when you first unswaddle a baby, they are going to like flail around and hit themselves in the face. They are going to do all of these things.

But the more time they get to practice, and the more practice they get going back to sleep after they whack themselves in the face, and the more practice they get just staying asleep and not waking themselves up, the better they do. So, do I think he's going to be a perfect sleeper forever? Of course not. This is why we have phone calls. There's going to be some ups and downs. Progress is not linear.

His first night was better than his second night because his second night, he was starting to learn some skills and he was starting to get frustrated with those skills not working out. But by the third night and then the fourth night, he had those skills nailed down. So, really, so much of it was just having that patience to watch the water boil, wait for him to get his act together without intervening. And it's so tempting to us to intervene. I see it all the time when we're practicing rolling. Like I'll take their hand, I'll let them kind of hold onto my finger and I'll pull them up a little bit halfway so they get the idea. And then I'll just hold them there and let them do the rest of the work themselves.

And parents and nannies and grandparents and caregivers always want to be like, pull them the rest of the way. "Oh, look, he rolled." But he didn't. You did it for him. And same thing with like falling asleep. If they're falling asleep in your arms, that's great and that's wonderful, but that's not the skill that they're going to need for their life. So, there's nothing wrong with rocking your baby to sleep, especially if they're sleeping through the night after that or they're only waking up once. If you're okay with what's happening, then it's fine. If you're not, then

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you need to make a change, and teaching them that skill is the first and most important step.

Another thing that we did is we consolidated his feeds to four feeds a day. So, they were alternating with his naps. So, we put him on three naps and four feeds as opposed to what he was on before, which was four short naps and kind of five feeds. His feedings were kind of all over the place. So, we got him on a feeding schedule. He's bottle fed of four bottles a day of 7 to 8 ounces. And that, I think, is also really helpful with the sleep training process because we're making sure that he's eating enough during the day and not waking up overnight because he's hungry. We are letting him eat what he wants to eat during the day, giving him a break if he doesn't take a good amount and offering it again in a little bit. Not making a fresh bottle or anything. We're doing it in the window where the bottle is still in play, which is usually 1 hour.

Sometimes people will go a little over that. Up to you, talk to your pediatrician. But within that window where the bottle is still good, we're going to feed them as much as we possibly can. And I was looking at a goal of 7 to 8 ounces, really 6 to 8 ounces per feed for a total of 28-ish ounces a day. And that can vary. It can be as low as 24, it can be much more than that, depending on where they are, having a growth spurt. Some days they eat a little less, some days they eat a little more. I know it's true for me too. But I also just wanted to add that was something that we were working on alongside getting him putting himself to sleep that was really helping to implement that schedule and get the whole family onto a routine.

So, I just thought you guys would like to hear about what a sleep training looks like as far as what a baby's doing. What I was doing during this time was a lot of just observing him. I was intervening at certain points, like giving him that reset or, you know, did we do the dream feed? One time when he was trying to fall back asleep during a nap, I did give him the pacifier to see if it would help, just because I did want him to have that experience of falling back asleep and we did want him to get a little sleep.

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But for the most part, I left him alone and I just let him figure out what he needed to do. And because I was not his parent and I didn't have to go to work the next day and I didn't have to take care of other kids and I didn't have to do all that stuff, I was able to just be really consistent with him and really focus on that. So, take that into consideration if you're thinking of sleep training on your own. Do it in a time when you can be fully focused on this task and not have a lot of responsibilities or a lot of things that you need to take care of the next day.

So, that's it. That's what it looks like. I'm good at my job. Which I should be. I've been doing it a really long time. If you have questions about sleep training, we would love to hear them. Message us on Instagram @happyfamilyafter. Leave a voicemail on the website, HappyFamilyAfter.com, shoot us an email. All the contact info is on the website. We would love to hear from you. And have a great day and a great week.

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