

Ep #66: Why Swaddling Is Your Newborn's Best Friend



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Do you have a newborn or a small baby who isn't sleeping great stretches and you've tried swaddling but you think they hate it? Stay tuned for some tips on how to make that work and get the best sleep of your baby's life.

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. We're going to make it a quick one today, but very important. I know everybody's coming off of the July 4th weekend. I hope you all had a wonderful time. I hope if you're pregnant that you're staying cool. Put your feet in cold water, that's really nice. My mom said when she was pregnant with my sister, she was born in at the end of June and I was little, I was like four, she would just put me in the baby pool in the backyard and stick her feet in it and just sit there with her feet in the pool and me playing.

If you are in the New York area, the weather's going to be perfect this weekend or I guess was perfect since you're hearing this on Monday. So, what are we going to talk about today? We're going to talk about swaddling because I think it's an important thing that people don't really understand so well, especially when you're brand new parents. So I want to just talk a little bit about what it is, why we do it, some recommendations for how to really make it work for you, and just some things I've seen some recommendations for swaddles I like and stuff like that.

So, this is the thing, what is swaddling? Well, swaddling, if you don't know, is wrapping your baby up so that their arms are basically restrained against their body. You can do this using a blanket or using a swaddle that's sort of pre-cut and sewn into a shape. And the purpose of it is because babies spend their first nine, however many months, curled up in a ball inside a uterus. And that's how

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their body is. So then they come out and because of sleep safety, we put them on their backs and that's not comfortable for them.

If you ever look at primates in the wild or even just like human beings holding their baby, when you're holding a tiny newborn, you're not generally holding them flat on their back facing out. You're holding them next to your body, like tummy to tummy, where they're curled up in a ball and they're laying on you. This is how they're actually meant to be. This is how they're most comfortable. You see the baby monkeys clinging on to their mom tummy to tummy or like chest to chest or whatever you want to call it, but basically facing each other with that input, that area that they're laying on is their front.

Laying on their back is actually a very unnatural position, but it is the safest. So, we started swaddling babies when we started putting them on their backs as a way to help keep them comfortable while also keeping them safe. So babies have a bunch of different reflexes, right? And one of them is called the Moro reflex or the startle reflex.

So when they feel like they're falling backwards, which happens anytime you're even trying to lay them down, they will flail their arms out and they will kind of jump. And they're going to frustrate themselves. They also, they can't really control their body movements, especially in the first month. Those body movements are not intentional at all.

So people might say, "Oh, she's trying to get her hands in her mouth or suck her fingers." She can't do that on purpose. So all she does is kind of claw at her face, trigger her own rooting reflex and drive herself crazy. Look at your baby when they're laying on you tummy to tummy versus when they're, you know, flat on their back on the ground or in the crib or in the bassinet or whatever. They start flailing around. And that is very unintentional.

Again, they were curled up inside your body or somebody's body for nine months or eight months or however long, and they didn't move. I mean, yes, there was a little bit, I'm sure you saw a little bit of movement on the ultrasound or whatever, but they were not like intentionally doing things with their arms and legs that involved like stretching them out because they didn't have space to do

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that. So now suddenly they're able to stretch out and they just don't understand what to do and they end up disturbing themselves and waking themselves up and hitting themselves in the face and all that kind of stuff.

So, an interesting little tidbit about baby reflexes that I think is so funny, I learned this years ago in one of my infant development classes in college, is that they have also something called the stepping reflex. So if you hold up a newborn baby in like a standing position, they will step their feet. Like they will lift their feet alternating and take like little steps. Not obviously intentionally moving forward, but they will pick up their feet.

And researchers noticed that the stepping reflex disappears around six months. And they were like, "Oh, why does this reflex disappear? Do other reflexes take priority? Like what's going on in their brains that this reflex disappears?" Then a researcher took a six or seven or eight-month-old baby, put them like waist deep in a basin of water, and what do you know, step, step, step, the feet started stepping. The reflex doesn't go away, their legs just get too fat for them to lift in the same way they were able to when they were newborns.

So, I just think that's so funny and what a duh thing for them to realize. They thought it was going to be this like elaborate thing about the brain and it turns out their legs are just not as easy to lift until they get a little bigger and then they can start lifting them to walk. So I just, I love that tidbit. I think it's so funny.

While we're on the subject, another tidbit that I love is, I forget what country it was, somewhere in South or Central America, these male anthropologists were studying this ancient tribe that kept their knives and weapons in the rafters of the house. And the male researchers were like, "Oh, why did they do that? Did they believe that the sun gave them some kind of power and that by putting them up high closer to the sun, the knives and weapons would receive this power from the sun?" And then a female anthropologist came on the trip with them and she said, "They put them up there so the kids won't get them." And the male researchers were all, "Oh yeah, that's probably it." So, anyway, I love that story too.

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So, swaddling. So, the purpose of it is to help them feel that same sense of containment that they felt when they were in the womb, to keep them from having those impulsive movements that are not intentional, that they're not doing on purpose, that startle reflex, these things that are going to make them wake up and disturb themselves and you.

We swaddle them so that we can keep that movement contained and give them that feeling of closeness, of grounding, of that physical input as if they were laying on their tummy, but now they're laying on their back. So if your parents are like, "What is this swaddling? We didn't swaddle you." Remind them that they probably put you on your tummy and that's why you slept great. So, but we can't do that anymore because of safety.

So, swaddling is very purposeful. Babies really do like it. They really do need it. I will often go to a family for the first time that's either not swaddling or swaddling kind of loosely or just using a swaddle that's too big or something. And the baby doesn't like it and it's not useful and the baby gets their arms out and they're flailing all over the place.

Swaddles should be quite tight. In fact, much like with the car seat, tighter is actually safer. I know a lot of people get nervous that if the car seat straps are too tight, the baby's going to be uncomfortable, but that is how tight they have to be for safety. I talked about this in the safety episode.

With the swaddle, if you just put it on loose, that's just going to be a loose blanket that they're not supposed to have. They're going to get it up over their face and then we might have some issues with safety. So, swaddles should be quite tight. They should not go up anywhere near their face. In fact, they shouldn't really be touching their chin or jaw line at all because that can trigger the rooting reflex, which means, "Oh, I feel," because obviously we evolved to breastfeed. We're mammals. It doesn't mean we have to do it, but the way that we evolved is that you feel that nipple touching your cheek and you turn your head and you're like, "Oh, here's the boob." So when something touches their cheek or their lower face, they turn towards it and start suckling because they're like, "Oh, it's a nipple."

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So, we don't want the swaddle touching their face. We want it to be quite tight. We don't need it to be tight around their hips or legs and in fact, if you do it too tight around their hips or legs, that can lead to some issues. So you want to still let them have their legs kind of movable, but it's very easy to do, to just really constrict the shoulders and the arms and keep those hips and legs free to move and kick around. There was a thing, God, so many years ago where they were starting to be concerned that people were swaddling the hips too tight because babies were getting hip dysplasia. Don't worry about that.

You can use a blanket. It can be tricky. It's a little bit like doing arts and crafts, like if you're good at it and you have a lot of experience, things are going to go much smoother and better. So if you want to practice a lot, that's great. But if you're brand new, don't be ashamed to use a pre-made swaddle or watch a video or whatever.

I was reading a book a few years ago about infant learning and I had to actually stop reading it and pick up a different book about the same topic because the author sort of was railing against swaddling and her reasoning was that she as an adult had taken a workshop where they had swaddled the adults. And when she got swaddled, she felt very anxious and she decided that swaddling makes babies feel anxious.

There are so many flaws in this logic, I don't even know where to start. You are a grown adult with a history of your life with God knows what kind of traumas and triggers and different things that have happened to you. You did not just come out of a womb. You've had 40, however many years to grow your arms and legs and gain control of your movements and your nervous system and be able to functionally move your body in a way that babies can't. And you didn't just spend the last nine months in a literally fetal position because you were a fetus, curled up in a ball. You are not a newborn baby. So if the idea of swaddling makes you anxious, don't project that onto your baby. And this woman shouldn't project it onto other people's babies. It does not make them anxious, it calms them down.

What about babies who fight the swaddle? I have many parents who, not coincidentally, call me for help because their baby's not sleeping and they want

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some overnight support or they want some doula care because their baby's having a lot of trouble sleeping and then I ask if they're swaddling and they say, "Oh no, she hates the swaddle."

They hate the act of being swaddled a lot of the time, like the process of actually getting the swaddle on, but once they are swaddled, they are so content and they will generally sleep so much longer. So, just because your baby is "fighting" the swaddle, aka having impulsive movements in their body that they are resistant to the change or to the process of being swaddled, does not mean that they hate the swaddle. Or if you're like, "Oh, they always break out of it," you need a better swaddle or you need to do a better job.

A lot of the swaddles on the market now are I think way too stretchy. They really give babies the opportunity to work their arms up in a way that they shouldn't be able to. I kind of hate all of the Velcro swaddles, but especially the ones that have a huge piece of Velcro and a big flap and stretchy material and they can work their way out of it.

If you're using the Snoo bassinet, that has its own swaddle built in that they've actually changed over the years because it was too loose. I used to double swaddle babies in the Snoo and now the Snoo swaddles have that extra layer to keep their arms down when you put the swaddle over them.

It's one of the 5 S's from Dr. Karp. I talked about this in the newborn soothing video. They love a swaddle. So my absolute favorite swaddle, and I don't normally make product recommendations and I'm actually going to have a whole episode about that. My favorite swaddle is the Miracle Blanket. The Miracle Blanket, that's what it's called.

It doesn't work on super tiny babies. It's a little big, but usually once they're nine or 10 pounds, it's perfect. So maybe like a few weeks, it's perfect. And what it does is it has this additional inner layer. It is a stretchy material, but it has this additional inner layer that you use to literally trap their arms next to their body, and then the outer layer wraps around and around and around. No Velcro, it just wraps around and there's just a loose pocket at the bottom for the legs. It's not tight around the legs.

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And the beauty of this swaddle is first of all, there's no Velcro, which is loud, gets trapped on everything in the wash, is very annoying to use. It has this extra arm capture. That's the real miracle of it. It keeps their arms trapped next to their body. And then when you wrap the thing around and around, it's very secure and you're not worried about it coming up over their face or that it's going to get too loose or do anything like that. Babies sleep amazing in this swaddle.

They're always coming out with new ones, the Ollie Swaddle, the this, the that. The Miracle Blanket's been around for years and years and I have not found one in all that time that I like better. And when they're tinier, I will usually just use a normal blanket, like those big muslin blankets are great for a swaddle. And sometimes I will take a thin, you know those flannel receiving blankets that aren't good for much other than burp cloths or putting down on the floor. Those are great to do a little arm capture inside the blanket swaddle. So it's just really important that you get their arms down next to their bodies, mostly the top part of their arms, like their shoulders and their upper arms.

Just do it. If you think that your baby hates it, just watch some videos and practice a little bit more. Maybe get a Miracle Blanket. They're not our sponsor, but I wish they were. I'll sponsor you. So, just swaddle your baby. Just do it. You will not regret it. And then when do you stop swaddling? That is a good question that I just thought of.

So they're not supposed to be swaddled obviously once they're starting to roll over. And that usually happens between three and four months. So you really want them out of the swaddle by 12 weeks. I think the AAP actually recommends out of the swaddle by eight weeks, which is fine. They can get out of the swaddle by then. That Moro reflex is starting to dissipate a little bit. They're starting to get a little more control over their bodies. You can start by taking one arm out and just swaddling one arm in.

Also, when people say they swaddle with the arms out, I understand what they mean, but I don't consider that a true swaddle. It's just wrapping them in something warm, which is nice, but an actual swaddle when I talk about it is arms in, arms down, arms contained.

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You know, somewhere around six, seven weeks, you want to maybe start working towards moving out of the swaddle, getting an arm out, this and that. If you're using the Snoo, they can stay swaddled longer because obviously they're strapped in so they're not going to be rolling anywhere. It really keeps them from moving, which I don't love, honestly, as they get older. I think learning how to move is a big part of learning how to sleep well. So, I do like to see people starting to move away from strapping them down into the Snoo, but they need to be strapped down. Anyway.

Start working them out of the swaddle. Maybe try my favorite tip is when you're trying to work out of the swaddle, bedtime tends to be the easiest time of the night to do anything. It's early in the night, they get their best sleep, you're still awake, yada. Put them down with one arm out or put them down with no swaddle.

And as the night starts to go on and they start to get more wakeful and more irritable and they're waking themselves up more and more, then you're ready to go to bed, put that swaddle back on. You know, maybe the first night it's at 8:00. Maybe the next night it's at 10:00. Maybe the night after that it's at midnight. Just slowly work towards them not having it. Maybe you're just getting through most of the night, but you're putting it on at 4 a.m. because that is the witching hour. 4 to 6 both a.m. and p.m. are just rough.

That is the witching hour. You just want them to actually get some real solid sleep. Put it on at 4 in the morning. But you can slowly wean off of it. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. So that is the thing about swaddling. Your baby is not fighting it. They do actually love it and want it. I don't know that I've met more than one baby in my entire career who actually slept fine without a swaddle from the early days. They just love it. Just do it. Watch some videos. Just like baby wearing, practice a little bit, get better at it.

Dads seem to love it. If you're a dad, go ahead and get good at swaddling. They seem to be great at it. Don't worry, it would be really hard to wrap a swaddle so tight that they couldn't breathe, but just observe them and see if they seem to be

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breathing comfortably. You're fine. And don't do it so loose that they can get it up over their face or anything like that. Have a great week. I'll talk to you soon.

To be sure you never miss an episode, be sure to follow the show in your favorite podcast app. We'd also love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Instagram @happyfamilyafter or at our website HappyFamilyAfter.com. On our website you can also leave us a voicemail with any questions or thoughts you might have, and you can roast your baby. Talk to you soon.

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.