

**Ep #68: “Can I Sleep Train My Baby If?”:
The Nursing Edition**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Do you think that your baby is never going to sleep through the night unless you quit breastfeeding? Stay tuned to find out if that's true.

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 are coming off of a little break. We didn't have an episode last week because I was very busy taking care of a baby. And not just any baby, I'm taking care of babies all the time, but this is a very special baby because she is the baby of some very dear friends of mine and she is my daughter. So, I donated eggs to them a few years ago and we finally have a baby to show for it, which is so exciting.

I am going to do a whole episode on the whole story of how this came to be and what it was like doing the process. I hope that it's interesting and useful to people, but it was an amazing journey and she's here and I've met her a bunch of times and it's just so amazing to see them become dads. They are just the greatest and they are so sweet with her and everyone in their families loves her and all of our friends love her and it's just so wonderful to have this baby here.

Today I am going to talk about something I'm going to do probably a little bit of a series on a few different episodes called, "Can I sleep train my baby if..." And I think there's a lot of misinformation and myth out there about when you, you know, can and can't, we'll call it sleep train, but really like expect your baby to be able to sleep through the night, be able to go through the night without a feed or at least for a very long time with maybe only one feed. Basically just create good sleep habits.

So, can I sleep train my baby if? And today we're going to start with breastfeeding, or chestfeeding, or body feeding, which is what I prefer to call it. You know, whatever terminology feels comfortable for you. I also like to call it

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nursing, so can I sleep train my baby if I am nursing? And I get this question a lot. And even more than it as a question, it's sort of a statement like, "Well, my baby can't sleep through the night because I'm nursing. So, you know, I've read that human milk is digested faster than formula, so they get a lot hungrier," or, "you know, that formula-fed babies are overfed and that's why they sleep so well, but it's not really real. They're just like knocked out from eating all this crappy junk food all the time." Like that's what, you know, naysayers say and I hate it. And it's not true. And it's silly.

And I will say that a lot of our clients, like probably more than half, especially in those first couple of months, but our sleep training clients, you know, down the road, more than half are body feeding, nursing when we work with them. And we do not tell them that they have to stop. It's like not a thing. You can totally body feed, chest feed, breastfeed, nurse your baby and have that baby sleep a really good stretch overnight. You can even have them sleep the whole night through 12 hours. You know, assuming there's no growth issues and there's, you know, you've got the okay from your pediatrician that they can go that long without a feed. You can do whatever you want.

It has nothing to do with the composition of human milk or of formula or how they work together. Certainly, you know, there are some considerations for the chestfeeding person when you are going that long without a feed. You don't want it to have a negative impact on your supply, but we'll talk about that. So basically, what I have seen in my many, many, many, many years of doing this is that it really doesn't matter what your baby is being fed.

And you can simply look at any family that is feeding their baby pumped expressed human milk versus nursing versus a bottle of formula or any combination therein and see that the what actually makes a difference in not necessarily your baby's ability to sleep through the night, but how set up for success they are in terms of sleeping through the night, are the behaviors associated with bottle feeding rather than nursing or body feeding.

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Now, does that mean that you have to stop nursing and just exclusively pump? No, of course not. That's annoying. Hats off to anyone who does that because it is so much work. But you know, you have a great nursing relationship, things are going great with nursing, you don't want to mess it up or change it or have to wash a lot more dishes or anything like that, which is totally fine. So, what do we do in that case? Well, the thing is that there's a few different behaviors that I associate with bottle feeding that are also really conducive to babies sleeping better.

And one of those behaviors is making sure they're getting enough to eat. So, if your baby is being bottle-fed, whatever is in that bottle, you know, human milk or formula, and they take an ounce and they kind of get distracted and they look around and they're kind of like, "Meh, all right, I'm done." Or they take like two ounces and then they start, you know, playing with it and looking around, you're not going to say, "Oh, okay, you only had two ounces, I guess you're done," or at least you shouldn't. You're going to make sure that baby gets that full feed, whether it's, you know, going back 15 to 30 minutes later to finish off the rest, whether it's taking them into a dark room, whether it's just saying like, "Hey, pay attention here," and making sure that bottle is getting into their mouth.

And a lot of times when you're nursing and your baby comes off the boob and seems to be done and they start looking around and this and that, you think, "Oh, well, you're done," and then you put your boob away and that's it. And maybe sometimes they're hungry 15 minutes later or 30 minutes later, an hour later, and they ask to nurse again, and so you nurse them again, and so on and so on. That is not a behavior that is conducive to getting long stretches of sleep because that baby is never filling up on like a full meal, on a full feed.

So they're snacking, they're hungry a little while later, then they're hungry a little while after that because they're never really eating a full meal. Just like you know if you ate a million snacks at a party, you would not want to go home and have dinner. You wouldn't want to eat the dinner at the party or whatever.

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So, what we're going to do with nursing in order to get the baby to do better is we're going to encourage them to really fill up during that feeding session when they are feeding, especially before bed, especially at bedtime. And you can do that a few different ways. You know, certainly taking away some distractions, bringing them into a different room, you know, not letting them look at the television or their siblings or the other people that are, you know, not right in front of their face where their food is. You know, reducing and limiting those distractions.

Another thing is that if your baby's getting very sleepy while feeding, you can do some compressions of the breast to get some milk out, kind of squirt it into their mouth while they're like dozing off. And you'll usually find that if they're done, they'll be like, "Ugh, what is this? I don't want this. I'm done." Like that last bite of food that you just can't get in your mouth because you're so full. But if they want to, you know, still eat, then that squirt of milk reminds them that they're actually there to do a job and that they need to be focused and that they need to be feeding. So, you know, that's one way to do it, just thinking about it in that way.

Also, making them go a little longer between feeds when they're a little bit older. I wouldn't do this to a baby under like three months, but if they're like four or five months and, you know, they had a feed and then two hours later they're looking to kind of feed again or maybe an hour later or whatever, you can try holding them off a little bit in the hope that they will eat better when you actually do offer them that feed. And you can distract them and you can soothe them in different ways. I'm not saying like let them scream and cry out of hunger. Just sort of like say, "No, we're not having another snack of milk right now. We're going to have milk in an hour when you're going to like really eat properly," and in the meantime, we're not going to do that.

Yeah, so one of the bottle feeding behaviors that I find that really is conducive to getting more sleep at night is making sure that the baby is getting enough to eat during the day, right? We're going to count those ounces when we're bottle feeding. We're going to know exactly how much the baby has taken and whether it's enough or not. And if it isn't, we're going to think about how can we increase

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that? Do we increase the amount per bottle? Do we increase the number of bottles? You know, what are we doing here to try to get more food into this baby? And you can also count how much you're pulling back overnight.

So say your baby's down to like, one six-ounce feed overnight and you really want to get rid of it, you can reduce that feed by an ounce every couple of nights until there's less and less, and then see how much hungrier your baby is for the morning feed, or say they're feeding at like 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning and you want them to wait till 7:00, you're going to spend time soothing them at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning and keeping them so that they're super hungry when they have that first feed and then they're really going to want to drink that bottle and you're going to see how much they're going to have.

So we can do the same thing with nursing. Now, you can't say exactly how many ounces they're taking and I'm going to cut you off an ounce sooner, but you can make sure they're getting plenty to eat during the day, especially at bedtime before you put them down for the night.

The other behavior that I think bottle feeding parents have that gives them an advantage in terms of sleep is that in the middle of the night or early in the night or whatever, but like during the nighttime, you are less likely to get up and make a bottle to feed a baby than you are to stick a boob in their mouth. It's just how it works.

Listen, the number of times that I have been with a baby that was fussy, that I knew wasn't like, super hungry, you know, had fed plenty, or we were working on like getting the sleep stretches, I'm like, "If I could stick my boob in your mouth right now, I would." Because I get that it's just so easy and you want to get back to sleep and you're uncertain. You know, a lot of the time you're uncertain how much they've eaten that day or how much they ate at the bedtime feed, how much they had, and you say, "You know, maybe you didn't eat enough. Okay, maybe you're still hungry. Let me offer you a little more. Let me just whip out my boob nice and easy and feed you a little bit more."

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Isn't it wild that like our bodies make food for babies? Like that's so crazy. Whether you're doing it or not, like the whole concept that we as a species and many other mammals can do that is so wild. But, you know, it's super easy to do that and I totally get it 100%. But if you want your baby to sleep through the night or to go longer stretches of sleep on their own in their crib, you want to remove that ease. You want to say, "Okay, I am not going to feed you right now."

So when you're bottle feeding and your baby wakes up and they're fussy, you're going to think to yourself a couple of different things. You're going to think, "Well, when was the last time they ate? Okay, you had six ounces two hours ago. There's no way you're that hungry right now. I'm going to soothe you in different ways. I'm going to use the pacifier, I'm going to rock you, I'm going to maybe leave you to like fuss and cry a little bit and sort yourself out, like figure out what you need to, you know, feel better. I'm going to leave you to do that or I'm going to soothe you in other ways. I'm not going to feed you because I don't actually think you're hungry. And I have the evidence to back that up."

And when you don't have the evidence in front of your face that like, "Yes, you drank six ounces," you are going to doubt and you're going to say, "Well, maybe they are hungry. Maybe they do need to eat. Maybe they didn't have a great nursing session. Maybe they, you know, were too distracted. Maybe we finished too early. Maybe they were acting like they were done but they actually weren't done." And you're going to have all these doubts that the person who knows how much milk their baby had doesn't have.

So, when you do those nursing sessions, especially that last one before bedtime and you're making sure they're really filling up, you can have a lot more confidence that your baby has fully fed, and then also when the baby wakes up, this is the annoying part, especially if it's when you want to be sleeping and not like, you know, 9 p.m. when you're still awake, you need to just not like whip out a boob as your first reaction. You need to give them some time. You need to try other methods of soothing.

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Probably what needs to happen is that another person needs to try some other methods of soothing, whether that's the other parent, whether that's a caregiver, whether that's a family member, whoever is there, because you and the baby are both going to be like, "Who are we kidding? We know what's actually going to happen here and that is that I'm going to nurse you." But when you are a person who can't nurse that baby, you're going to try a bunch of different stuff.

And a lot of the time, that stuff is going to work. Like a baby that is truly hungry, truly, just voraciously starving, is not going to be settled by a pacifier. They're not going to be settled by rocking or any of these other things that I, a professional, can really get a baby to settle. So, passing the baby off to someone else and having them try some strategies is really going to work in your favor.

And that brings me to the second thing that the bottle feeding parent is going to think if their baby wakes up a short time after, you know, their last feed or a short time after they've been put down, which is, a bottle is annoying to make and annoying to clean, and I don't want to do it unless you really, really need it. So where you might try nursing and say, "Here, do you want this?" And they take a couple sips and then they stop, no harm, no foul. All right, fine, you didn't want that.

You make a bottle, you heat it up, you mix it up, you do whatever, and then they're like, "No, this isn't what I want." You're like, "Ugh, now I have to like deal with this." You know, whether it's you're getting rid of whatever's in it because they've touched it and some people are particular about that, whether you're sticking it back in the fridge, you know, whatever you're doing, you're like, "This is a pain in my butt now. I put all this effort in and you don't even want it." So, you are not really going to try the bottle unless you have good reason to think that they are actually hungry.

So, when you apply these behaviors to nursing, making sure the baby's eating plenty during the day, eating plenty at those feeds, and not jumping to feed right away when they get hungry overnight, then voila, you have a baby that starts sleeping longer and longer stretches. Now I know it's easier said than done, but

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that is the gist of it. So, no, there's no reason why if your baby is drinking human milk or nursing or whatever you're doing, that they are not capable of sleeping just as long as a baby that's being formula fed.

Now, as a caveat, definitely talk to your lactation consultant or your doctor or whoever and make sure that going, you know, a long stretch without extracting milk from your body isn't going to majorly affect your supply. Now, generally, our bodies are very smart and they know, like, okay, the baby is eating a lot more during the day, so we're going to produce more during the day and produce less at night. But sometimes it does work out that the supply is a little less overall, and a lot of nursing parents end up doing a pumping session overnight, either like right before you go to bed.

Say you put the baby down at 7:00 after a nice big feed, then you pump at like 10:00 or 11:00 before you go to bed and everybody wakes up at 7:00 in the morning and the baby feeds a nice big feed because you're so full from going all night without feeding, or maybe the baby has one feeding at 4 a.m. or whatever. Just because you need to extract milk from your body doesn't mean your baby needs to eat, which is what I'm saying here.

And you may decide you want to keep one overnight feed because you like having the time together or you like, you know, having the milk taken out of your body because it can get pretty uncomfortable when you go a long time. But your body will adjust to doing fewer feeds overnight, and it's really just up to you and between you and your personal experts, your lactation consultant and whatever, about how long you can actually go without expressing.

And I'm going to leave you with a quick story, which is that a mom I worked with on sleep training years ago, her baby looked like the Michelin man. He was enormous at eight months old. And they were co-sleeping and she was like nursing him all night. And I was like, "Nursing all night, every two hours at eight months old, that's crazy." And she goes, "Well, yeah, like I've been feeding him every two hours because breast milk is digested faster than formula and he's going to be hungry."

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And I'm like, "Madam," as we say. "Madam, yes, he's digesting the breast milk, but that doesn't mean that he needs his tummy full all the time." She was like waking him up to feed him because she thought that he was like going to starve to death if she wasn't feeding him every two hours around the clock at eight months old. And you do not need to do that. And God bless her. We fixed it. He started sleeping through the night. She immediately got pregnant again the first night her older son slept through the night, which was crazy. But anyway, do a little research, talk to some different people, find out that information.

But yes, once we get out of the mindset of a nursed baby is always hungry whenever they fuss, we start to learn that we can have some really good sleep stretches, some really good daytime routines, and all these different things. And if you're combo feeding, which I always recommend having the bottle be part of your routine every day or every few days, just to keep them used to it, keep them in the groove of it, if they're not having bottles all day like when you're at work or whatever.

And the bedtime bottle is a great one for that because you can make sure that they're eating plenty and that it's really full and that they're getting plenty to eat so that if they're up a few hours later, you know for sure that they've had enough to eat. That's it. Breastfed babies can sleep through the night. I promise.

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