

Trained Night Crier

THE PROBLEM

Your child is over 4 months of age and awakens and cries one or more times at night. He does not need to be fed at these times. He wants to be held and entertained. This behavior usually occurs every night and has been present since birth. Such a child can be called a trained night crier. The child is held, rocked, or walked until he is asleep. When he awakens, he is not tired; you and your spouse are!

Several factors can cause a child to become a trained night crier:

- Rocking the baby to sleep. All infants partially awaken four or five times each night after dreams. Most can put themselves back to sleep. Children who have not been taught how to comfort and quiet themselves cry for a parent. If your custom at naps and bedtime is to rock your child until she is asleep, she won't learn how to go back to sleep without your help. Babies who are rarely placed in their cribs while they are still awake expect their parents to appear and help them go back to sleep after normal awakenings at night. Since they usually fall asleep in their parents' arms rather than the crib, they never learn to associate the crib and the mattress with sleeping.
- Providing entertainment during the night. Awakening and crying can become more frequent if they lead to pleasurable experiences such as being walked, rocked, played with, or having other prolonged contact with the parent. Sleeping in the parents' bed also reinforces the problem. Trained night crying sometimes begins after an acute illness such as a cold that blocks nasal passages, overheating from hot weather or too much clothing, or a change in the infant's sleep environment, perhaps while traveling. At these times, the parents temporarily make an effort to provide increased nighttime attention. When the nighttime contact stops, many babies quickly settle back into their previous sleep patterns. But some enjoy the contact so much that they continue their demands for attention.
- Parental belief that any crying is harmful. All young children cry in response to change ("protest crying"). Crying is their only option before they learn to talk. Crying for brief periods is not physically or psychologically harmful. The thousands of hours of attention and affection you have provided for your child will easily offset and unhappiness associated with unlearning a bad sleep pattern.

If you follow the recommendations outlined below, your child's sleep habits will usually start to improve in two weeks. The older the child, the harder it is to change his habits. Infants over 1 year of age will vigorously protest any change and fight sleep even when they're tired. They may cry for hours. Without treatment, however, these children won't start sleeping through the night until 3 or 4 years of age, when busy daytime schedules finally exhaust them. By that time, you'll be exhausted too.

THE SOLUTION

At naptime and bedtime, place your baby in the crib drowsy but awake. It's good to hold babies and provide pleasant bedtime rituals. But when your baby starts to act drowsy, place her in the crib. Her last waking memory needs to be of the crib and mattress, not you. If she is very fussy, rock her until she settles down or is almost asleep, but stop before she's fully asleep. She needs to learn to put herself to sleep. She will need this self-quieting skill to cope with normal awakenings during the night.

Help your child attach to a security object. A security (transitional) object is something, like a cuddly stuffed animal, soft toy, doll, or blanket, that helps a child cross over from wakefulness to sleep. It can provide reassurance and help your child separate from you. Sometimes covering a stuffed animal with one of mother's T-shirts helps the child accept it. Include the security object whenever you cuddle or rock your child during the day. Also include it in the bedtime ritual by weaving it into your storytelling and tucking it into the crib next to your child. Eventually, he will hold and stroke the security object at bedtime in place of you.

When your baby cries at naptime or bedtime, make brief contact every five to 15 minutes. Visit your baby before she becomes very upset and difficult to console. Younger or more sensitive infants may need to be checked on every 5 minutes. You be the judge. Gradually stretch out the interval between visits. Infants cannot learn to comfort themselves without some crying. This type of crying is not harmful.

Make the visit supportive, but brief and boring. Don't stay in the room longer than one minute. Don't turn on the lights. Act sleepy. Whisper, "Shhh, everyone's sleeping." Add something positive, such as,

“You’re a wonderful baby,” or “You’re almost asleep.” Never show anger or punish your baby during these visits. If you hug him, he probably won’t let go. So touch him gently and redirect him to his security object. This brief contact will not reward your baby enough to encourage him to repeat the behavior.

Do not remove your child from the crib. Do not rock her, play with her, or bring her to your bed. Most young infants will cry from 30 to 90 minutes and then fall asleep.

When your baby cries in the middle of the night, rock him to sleep temporarily. Until your child learns how to put himself to sleep at naps and bedtime, make middle-of-the-night awakenings as easy as possible for everyone. If he doesn’t fuss for more than five or ten minutes, respond as you would at naptime and bedtime. If he cries longer, take him out of the crib and rock him to sleep. Don’t turn on the lights or take him out of the room, however. Try not to talk to him. Help him learn to put himself to sleep at naps and bedtime, when everyone can better tolerate the crying.

Eventually phase out the nighttime rocking. Do this only after your child has learned to quiet herself and put herself to sleep at naptime and bedtime. Once she is able to do this, you can make the same demands of her when she cries in the middle of the night. Go to her every 15 minutes, but make the contact brief and boring. By this time, middle-of-the-night crying usually can be eliminated within a few nights.

Do not keep the crib in your bedroom, if possible. If the crib is in your bedroom, move it to a separate room. If this is impossible, cover one of the side rails with a blanket so your baby can’t see you when he awakens.

Eliminate long daytime naps. After your baby has napped for two hours during the day, awaken her. If she is in the habit of taking three naps during the day, try to change her habit to two naps a day by delaying the first nap.

Don’t change wet diapers during the night. You should change the diaper only if it is soiled or you are treating a bad diaper rash. If you must change your child, use as little light as possible (a flashlight, for example), do it quietly, and don’t provide any entertainment.

If your child won’t lie down in the crib, leave her in the standing position. Try to get her to settle down and lie down. If she refuses or pulls herself back up, leave her that way. She can lie down without your help. Encouraging her to lie down soon becomes a game.

Keep a sleep diary to record the time your child awakens in the morning, when and how long he naps during the day, and what you did to put him to sleep. At bedtime, record the time he went to sleep, how long it took, and what you did. When your child awakens at night, record the time, how long he was awake and what you did. Bring the diary with you to the next visit.