

“Feed Play Sleep”

Few things cause me more worry than the concept “Feed Play Sleep”.

It is one of the most destructive teachings I encounter.

As has been described elsewhere in these writings, sleep is most usefully regarded as a learned skill. Like all human skills, without exception, as you become more tired the skill is more difficult to perform. Fortunately when explaining this, mothers universally understand. It is a common experience of mothers that they become over- tired and sleep may be difficult to achieve.

In children the impact of fatigue is more severe and occurs more rapidly than in adults. This sensitivity to overtiredness is at it’s worst with the **youngest** and the **lightest** babies. Woman who have had children previously or who have been caring for a baby for some months know this based upon their own experience.

In Australia many families are taught a concept called “Feed Play Sleep”. Using this program children are held awake for significant periods of time for stimulation, play time, stomach time. For example I have seen families where children in their first 4 to 8 weeks of life are being guided to be awake for 90-120 minutes. I have seen premature twins being held awake for up to 90 minutes. This is a major mistake.

While it is difficult to give specifics, in the first twelve weeks of life the baby’s ability to be constructively awake is about 45-60 minutes during the day and less at night. The range is almost always 45-75 minutes.

The range of waking times is shortest for newborns i.e. about 45 minutes and will increase very slowly as they become older.

By 12 weeks a waking period of say up to 60-75 minutes will be more than enough time to have moved to the point of tiredness.

What happens with “feed, play, sleep” is that a “play” period is introduced into life too early. The baby is held awake artificially. The child becomes overtired and the sleep which follows is put at risk. The amount of risk to sleep increases as the length of the “play” period expands.

Please DO NOT USE “FEED PLAY SLEEP” as a philosophy of care EVER. This applies to all children of all age groups.

Feed Play Sleep introduces tiredness followed by overtiredness and then places the babies sleeps at risk.

What I teach is called the “Happy Wake Time”.

The “happy wake time” is exactly that. The child has awoken from a sleep and once fed or after a little “conversation” is then fed will enter a state of being happily, calmly, constructively awake. The baby will self declare for this event. You do not need to create it. Commonly the happy wake time will emerge by about 3-5 weeks of age and is most clearly seen after about 0700. The child finishes a feed and is just happily awake. (Please note that up to about this age i.e. 3-5 weeks life is essentially feed, sleep, feed sleep.)

The value of the “happy wake time” concept is that the happy wake time has a beginning and an end. The beginning of the end is noted by a change in behaviour. Babies have their own signs of tiredness but can include any of the following. Yawning, blinking, frowning, a “tired cry”, rapid body movements and by three months rubbing at the eyes with the back of the wrist or hand. These signals are important. They indicate that the baby is almost ready for sleep. They may want a tiny feed or minor reassurance, preparation for bed and then to be put down to go to sleep.

Please note that these signals of tiredness announce that the baby has entered a “window of opportunity”. They are tired and ready for sleep but not so overtired that they will have trouble achieving sleep.

The window of opportunity is quite narrow. For some babies it may be 2-3-4 minutes long.

If you get the timing correct the baby will go to sleep most efficiently and also maintain that sleep for an appropriate time.

If the baby is awake too long you may “miss the opportunity”. The baby may become overtired and may have trouble achieving or maintaining the next sleep. There will be times with all babies where they are awake too long and do become overtired. This is fine and is sometimes unavoidable. When you see this happen it is OK. Just focus on spending the next few hours i.e. 6 – 12 – 24 hrs catching up on the total volume of sleep and “repairing the overtiredness”.

The differences between these two philosophies are clear and important.

Feed play sleep holds a baby awake for an artificial time and makes them prone to tiredness and eventually overtiredness. The overtired baby will have trouble achieving and maintaining sleep. Thus feed play sleep puts a babies sleep at risk.

The **happy wake time** concept, looks for early signs of tiredness, avoids overtiredness and protects the next sleep.

Concluding comments.

1. Never use “feed play sleep” for any baby at any age.
2. To manage sleeps, particularly day sleeps, look for your babies early signs of tiredness and put the baby down for sleep before they become overtired.

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