

This information sheet summarises research-based evidence about ways for partners, families and friends to support new parents with their baby's sleep. For more information on this and many other topics, please visit [www.basisonline.org.uk](http://www.basisonline.org.uk).

Partners, grandparents, siblings and friends have an important role to play when there is a new baby in the family, particularly in supporting new mums, relieving postnatal fatigue, and reducing stress. This information sheet offers suggestions for those who are helping families survive the sleep disruption of the first year with a new baby.

## What do you need to know about infant sleep development?

- Babies need closeness to caregivers to help them feel safe, and to regulate their temperature, breathing and heart rate. It is a myth that too much cuddling or attention will 'spoil' a baby.
- At birth, babies' brains are around 25% of their adult size. Their brains grow very quickly over the first year of life and require lots of energy to fuel this growth.
- Human milk is high in sugar and low in fat, this provides babies with lots of energy to support brain growth, but it doesn't fill them up for long periods of time. Most babies wake at least every 2 hours to feed.
- Babies are born without any understanding of night and day and so sleep and wake times occur around the clock. It takes several months for a baby's day-night pattern of wake and sleep to become established.
- Baby sleep patterns can vary greatly—some will sleep for 20 hours a day and some for 10 hours. Sleep patterns do not become similar between babies until the end of the first year, so comparing babies is unhelpful.



## Think about how you talk about sleep

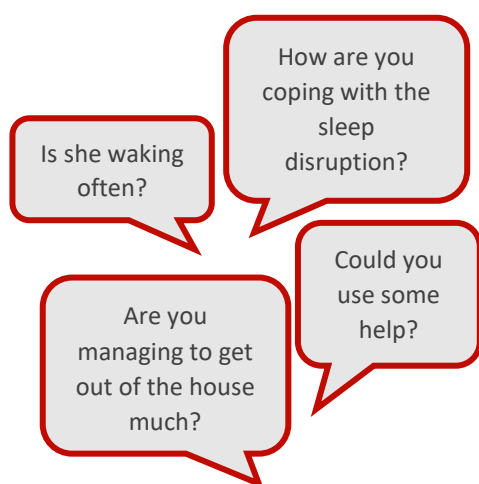


Figure 1. Normalising questions you could ask a new parent

It is very normal for parents to lose a lot of sleep during their baby's first year. All new parents face sleep disruption; however, the way that we talk about infant sleep doesn't acknowledge that babies wake often during the night. When we ask new parents questions like '*is he sleeping though the night yet?*' we can cause anxiety, make them question their parenting abilities, and may make them think their baby has a sleep problem.

When parents are experiencing sleep disruption it can be tempting to suggest they 'fix' the baby, for example by enforcing sleep schedules, by attempting to sleep train or by feeding the baby formula or other food to help them sleep. Some of these methods may gain parents a few extra minutes of sleep for a short while, but it is normal for baby sleep patterns to change often in the first year. Instead of focussing on the baby's sleep, supporting the parents is much more helpful.

Parenting practices **change over time** and vary widely across the world, **and many parenting ideas from the past now seem to be to be old-fashioned**. For example, in the past baby formula milk contained lots of ‘heavy’ cow’s milk protein that took babies a long time to digest, and parents were told to give their babies formula so they would sleep, but nowadays formula contains ingredients that are more easily digested, and formula-fed babies wake to feed just as often as breast-fed babies.

Parenting comes with many pressures and conflicting advice so it is important to be supportive of parent’s choices, even if it they weren’t your choices, or aren’t what you would do.

## Ways to support sleep deprived new parents

Sleep disruption can affect all members of the family. For tired parents, basic tasks like cooking, cleaning and washing can be extremely difficult with a new baby. Sleep disruption can make parents more likely to get angry, upset and be unable to think clearly, so it is important to be patient, compassionate and non-judgemental.

Let new parents know that it is ok to ask for help if they need it, but remember they need you to do things that help them, so don’t just offer to hold the baby so they can do the chores! In the early days, parents often want to stay close to their baby, especially if they are breastfeeding. There are many ways that you can help, such as:

- Bring pre-made meals that can be easily reheated
- Help around the home: do laundry, wash dishes, clean, pick up, empty bins or do grocery shopping
- Make sure that mum has a comfortable chair and plenty of water available, especially if she is breastfeeding
- Offer childcare to siblings of the new baby; Hold or watch the baby whilst mum has a shower

## Be sure you know about sleep safety

Safe sleeping guidance applies day and night, so it is important that everyone who cares for a baby knows about safe sleeping. If you are looking after a baby, make sure there is a suitable place for the baby to sleep, for every sleep. Babies should always be placed on their back to sleep on a clear flat space. Portable infant carriers like car seats, are designed to keep babies safe whilst travelling, not as a main sleeping space and babies should be taken out of these as soon as they arrive at their destination.

Unsafe sleeping can happen both intentionally or unintentionally and is particularly common when parents are feeling very tired. Extreme tiredness can lead to risky situations such as falling asleep on the sofa, with the baby on your chest.

Bed-sharing is a common practice, especially for breastfeeding mums, with around 50% of UK babies bed-sharing on some nights by three months of age. Fathers / partners who may be sharing a bed with a baby should think about this and move to an alternative space to sleep if it may not be safe to sleep in bed with the baby.

### Safe sleep basics

Put babies on their back for every sleep

In a clear, flat sleep space

Keep them smoke free day and night

Never fall asleep with a baby on a sofa

Never sleep in the same bed with a baby if you have consumed alcohol or drugs (including medicines that make you sleepy); if you are a smoker, or if the baby was born prematurely.

The Lullaby Trust provides more information on safer sleep for babies, visit [www.lullabytrust.org.uk](http://www.lullabytrust.org.uk)

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