

The latest on bed sharing and breastfeeding

Questions regarding mother-infant bed-sharing have been the subject of many research articles over the past 20 years. Recent research has tackled specific questions regarding hazards and benefits of parent-infant sleep contact. To help health professionals keep up to date with recent research knowledge, this review summarises advances in our understanding of bed sharing and breastfeeding based on new studies published over the last 3-4 years, particularly focusing on studies relevant to the UK population. Although questions about infant sleep location still remain, identification of bed-sharing risks, and strategies for their avoidance, are beginning to be clarified.

Ball H (2012). The latest on bed sharing and breastfeeding. *Community Practitioner* 85(1):29-31.

MIDIRS Comments

Helen Ball has been an absolute gift to this area (if you are not familiar with her older work, you will find plenty of references to her earlier work in the *Community Practitioner* paper) and this article comprises another really helpful analysis of the issues. As she explains, there have been two perspectives on co-sleeping: looking at its relationship to breastfeeding, and concern that it may be a risk factor for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). But, as Ball discusses, many of the scaremongering headlines about SIDS and co-sleeping have involved unhelpful media hype, and a careful analysis of the research that has been carried out shows that problems have arisen because: (a) in some research co-sleeping has included sofa sleeping (now a known risk factor for SIDS) as well as bed sleeping; and (b) researchers have not separated out parents who used alcohol, which is another known risk factor.

In her conclusion Ball notes that:

'The majority of infant sleep safety research has been conducted in the USA, capturing dangerous sleep practices among minority populations, and leading to stringent anti-bed sharing recommendations (AAP 2005). In the past few years, UK research has unpicked the characteristics of safe and unsafe bed sharing, and identified the characteristics of bed sharers at high and low SIDS-risk. Multiple international studies have confirmed the relationship between bed-sharing and breastfeeding: UK 'Reduce the Risk' advice for SIDS now emphasises the importance of breastfeeding, and specifies those circumstances under which bed-sharing should be avoided (DH 2009).' (Ball 2012: 31).

Other recently published papers on this area have included Morgan *et al's* (2011) study showing that separation from his/her mother may be a stressor that the human neonate is not well-evolved to cope with and Eastaugh's (2011) article which tackles some of the misconceptions surrounding co-sleeping. She explains why she believes that a breastfeeding mother who chooses to sleep with her baby, and has minimised any risk in the environment, is not putting her baby at any risk.

Helen Ball and colleagues have received funding to produce an online resource to provide evidence-based information for parents and professionals in this area, which will soon be available at www.isisonline.co.uk.

References

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