



# **Baby Sleep Without Sleep Training:**

**10 reasons Your Nurture Matters**

Copyright The Caring Instinct

If you've ever found yourself sitting up in the middle of the night rocking your sleepless baby while googling "how to get my baby to sleep", you will have read that the reason your baby isn't sleeping well is that you have created some "negative sleep associations". Your only solution? Apparently, you've got to teach your baby "independent sleep".

You gulp as you realise the "negative sleep associations" turn out to be the exact things that you have been doing instinctively to help your baby fall asleep: feeding them, cuddling them, rocking them, singing to them...

How can it be that something that feels so natural and that your baby adores is somehow preventing them from sleeping better?

If you stopped comforting your baby at night, would they somehow magically "self-soothe"?

Let's dive right into the science and myths behind "negative sleep associations" and "independent sleep".



Both search engines and AI will invariably return a version of sleep training narrative if asked about baby sleep – and, most likely, so will the older women in your family. Here in the West, we come from generations of trying to push babies into independent sleep long before they are ready for it.

Since The Industrial Revolution, parents have been told that sleep is a skill that parents need to teach their baby and nurture is a nuisance factor. Characteristically short-sighted, capitalism has always wanted mothers in the workforce, not nurturing their babies during the critically important window for brain development, the first three years of life.

Even though independent sleep for babies only works sometimes, and has come at a high cost of raised SIDS rates and mental health struggles in the Western world, its principle is so seductively simple that marketing can't stop pushing it.

This principle is: what is, will be.



Back in the 1920s, when mothers were warned against displaying any affection towards their children in their “mawkish and sentimental way” it sounded like this:

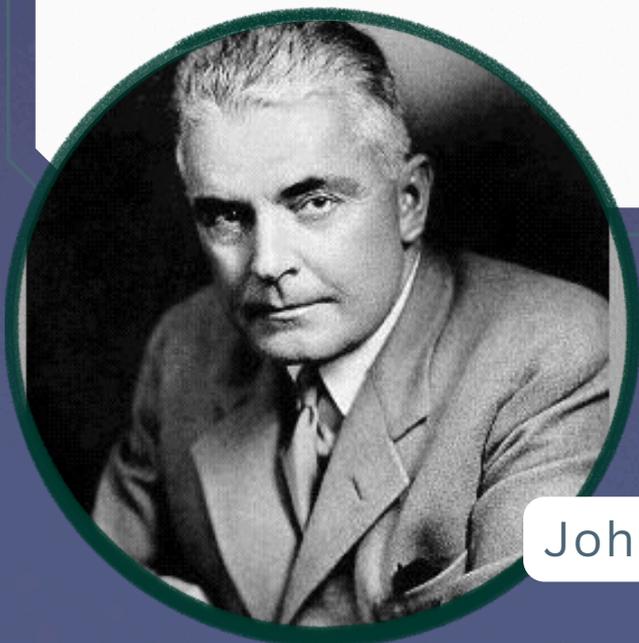
“There are rocks ahead for the over-kissed child,” who, if their mother doesn’t get a grip, will experience “invalidism in adulthood”. (Dr. John B. Watson, 1928)

Repackaged over the years and focused now on setting parents free, this principle is still traceable in modern advice:

“You will never get any free time in the evening if you keep responding to every cry.”

“You are rewarding your baby’s waking by breastfeeding them at night. You’ll be stuck forever if you keep spoiling them.”

**But “what is, will be” couldn’t be further from the truth when it comes to human development.**



John B. Watson



Babies can't be trained to be independent. **It's not training, but generous nurture that prepares babies for life best.**

Research shows over and over again that it's the most nurtured children that prove the most resilient and who, when the time is right, are most eager to push off into independence.

“Nurture has the tremendous power to grow a baby's brain by connecting and shaping resilient emotional brains that enjoy improved mental wellness. Inside the brain, nurture leads to resilient stress systems, resilient protein expression from DNA, and resilient emotional systems – all of which make up mental wellness,” writes Greer Kirshenbaum, PhD, a neuroscientist and creator of Nurture Neuroscience, a movement to support parents to improve long-term mental health for their babies and themselves.

**Sleep is not a skill to learn. It is an ability of our body to fall into a state of rest when we are feeling just the right amount of tired and just the right amount of safe.**



For babies, sleep is a vulnerable state. Wakings are built into their sleep architecture to protect them from going into sleep so deeply that they wouldn't be able to rouse. On top of this, babies are wired to seek your proximity at night – and to be soothed by it. They need the reassurance of your generous nurture before their brains learn to handle sleep, go into it easily and link sleep cycles independently.

How exactly do you reassure your baby at night? You can't go wrong with “negative sleep associations”!

You have heard that feeding, holding, cuddling and rocking your baby to sleep all create “bad habits”. It's time to highlight just some of the numerous **benefits that both babies and parents enjoy** when they lean into these beautiful practices as old as humanity itself.

(If, even with all the nurture on your side, you are experiencing very frequent and / or long wakings with your baby and are exhausted, reach out [HERE](#) to troubleshoot.)



## 10 Benefits of Nurturing Your Baby To Sleep

### 1. You get your tired baby to sleep!

Nurturing your baby to sleep helps both of you release oxytocin, a powerful hormone that lowers everyone's stress and helps your baby feel calm, relaxed, connected – and drift off to sleep.

Try this reframe: instead of “I have to rock / nurse / pat my baby for 10 minutes for every nap”, say “I simply rock / nurse / pat my baby for 10 minutes and voila! She's fast asleep!”



## 2. You create beautiful (implicit) memories.

Creating memories doesn't start with trips to amusement parks when your little one is 4 years old.

Did you know that you are creating crucial memories for your baby every moment you spend with them?

They are not the conscious type (a story your baby would be able to recall), but implicit ones, also called body memories.

Unconsciously, your baby's body remembers the warmth of your cuddle, the reassurance of your proximity, the safety that they feel in your arms. These memories nourish your baby's brain, becoming the foundation of your baby's happiness and trust in the world.



### 3. You create positive sleep associations.

Since babies can make implicit memories, sleep associations are a thing!

And the sweetness of your milk, the warmth of your embrace, the smell of your skin and the soothing rocking are the most positive ones your baby can ever have. They become your baby's happy sleep cues that create a lifelong trust in sleep.

Sleep is a long game. Sometimes, when parents follow sleep training advice and withdraw sleep-supporting nurture, they might get what looks like better sleep in the short term, but a few years later their "independent" baby turns into an anxious pre-schooler who is afraid of their own bed.

Indeed, scientists argue today that insomnia in adults can often be traced back to a loss of nurture around sleep during infancy. (We know that rats that experience maternal deprivation during sleep in infancy show all symptoms of insomnia as adults.) One in every three adults in the UK struggle with significant sleep problems. When you are nurturing your baby at night, know that you are helping their sleep in the long-term, not just for tonight.



#### 4. You teach your baby to link sleep cycles.

I've borrowed this phrase from the sleep training playbook, but the real "teaching" happens – you've guessed it! – through nurture. Something else that experiments with rats helped scientists to understand is that the very act of intermittent sucking and receiving portions of milk is exactly what helps infant mammals organise their sleep patterns and consolidate sleep.

Nursing every now and then is how your baby's brain learns to eventually sleep through the night!

(You should be getting adequate rest while breastfeeding your baby at night too. If this is not the case and you are exhausted, let's get you the sleep you need.)



If you've ever dared mention your disrupted night sleep with your baby to an older woman in your family, you might have heard "just give him a bottle" in response.

This advice used to hold some water in your mother's generation when old-style casein-rich formula kept babies' tummies occupied for longer as they struggled to digest it.

In modern formula, large casein molecules are broken down to mimic the optimal digestibility of human milk.

Today's research shows no difference in the overall amount of sleep that breastfeeding and formula-feeding parents get.

There may be multiple reasons why formula may be essential for your family, but hopes for better sleep with a switch to formula are often unfounded.



## 5. Breastfeeding: the all-round health miracle for mothers and babies.

Breastfeeding and baby sleep are beautifully interconnected.

Breastfeeding helps both you and your baby fall asleep.

When they do wake up at night for a nurse, they signal to your body to produce more of the liquid gold, the natural sedative for your baby that tethers them to your circadian rhythm, helping them get their nights and days right.

I am sure you know how ridiculously beneficial breastfeeding is for your baby. From protecting them from life-threatening illnesses to seeding their gut microbiome with all the right bacteria and nourishing their developing brains, it really is the best start in life.

It's much less often that **mothers hear about the benefits of breastfeeding for them...**



Breastfeeding slashes the mother's risk of breast and ovarian cancer. It protects you from diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and osteoporosis, and the benefits persist for decades.

In the short term, it helps you respond to your baby lightning fast, making night wakings significantly shorter and easier.

But unsolicited anti-breastfeeding advice never comes with a disclaimer.

Have you ever heard, "Just give her a bottle even if it means breastfeeding is cut short and your chances of getting cancer will be higher"? No, me neither.



## 6. Help your baby grow a beautiful resilient brain while healing yours.

During infancy your baby's brain is developing at breakneck speed. Neuroscientists have calculated that it builds up to one million connections every second. This process is both programmed by genetics and shaped by your baby's experiences.

Scientists have discovered that your nurture is the most growth-boosting experience that lights up your baby's whole brain.

“When infants grow up with reliably nurturing caregivers, their brains are bathed in what I call a nurture bath,” writes neuroscientist and author Greer Kirshenbaum, PhD. “The infant brain releases a cocktail of hormones and neurotransmitters beginning with oxytocin and followed by a cascade of dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and GABA – which helps them develop resilient emotional brain circuitry.”



Everything becomes easier for a brain that was lucky enough to grow in generous nurture: relationships, school, handling stress and conflict, achievement and creativity.

**Nurture is your child's golden opportunity.**

**Amazingly, it is yours, too.**

When you become a parent, you enter the third period of heightened neuroplasticity after infancy (up to 3 years) and adolescence. Your brain rewires itself: it becomes sensitive to your baby's cues, fiercely protective and alert to threats. If, at this formative time, parents pull themselves apart from their baby in a misguided belief that they need to train them to sleep independently, their brain misses out on the safety cues that should come in response to this alertness. But every time you hold your baby, smell them and sleep next to them, your brain receives a safety signal that it craves. With repetition, just by nurturing your baby, you rewire your own brain for resilience, even if you come from a history of anxiety and trauma.

**Our babies need us to be able to grow a beautiful resilient brain. They also gift us an opportunity to heal ours.**



## 7. You become an expert on your baby.

When you refuse to be held back by the fearful warnings of our low-nurture culture and choose unconditional love and nurture instead, your newly plastic brain rewards you with superpowers.

You become an expert on your baby. You can communicate with them long before they have language. You can sense when they are becoming unwell before they run a fever. Maybe you sense an underlying problem behind sleep disruptions, don't settle for one-size-fits-all kind of advice and dig deeper instead.

This sensitivity will grow into an understanding of your child that will serve your bond for years to come.



## 8. You access an easier way to nurture babies through the night and get some decent sleep.

Proven by research to get parents and babies the most (!) sleep, laden with long-term benefits and made out to sound as the ultimate failure by the sleep training culture, **co-sleeping** can be a sanity-saver for families, but **it must be practiced safely**.

You've heard the scare stories: your child will never sleep independently and your marriage will crumble! But what multiple studies (and experience) show is that co-sleeping in infancy improves emotional regulation and reduces tantrums in toddlers, boosts independence (!) and problem-solving in 2-3-year-olds and increases cognitive capacity for 6-year-olds. The benefits don't stop in early childhood. Babies who co-sleep with their parents grow into more confident, optimistic and happy young adults. Co-sleeping can be a win-win for the whole family. For support with creating the safest co-sleeping set up possible – reach out [HERE](#).



## 9. You and your child enjoy unconditional repair at the end of the day.

Newborns are pretty much fused to their parents. They are rarely content when they can't see, hear or smell you (very often – when they are not right on you.)

But before you know it, empowered by your consistent nurture, your baby will be venturing farther away on their own adventures. Your days will get busier too.

Apart from this physical separation, there is also an emotional one. You will be inevitably putting in boundaries for your little person. With an active and inquisitive toddler, you might well find yourself saying “no” to them on repeat throughout the day just to keep them safe.

If you have kept up bedtime nurture, it becomes your opportunity for unconditional repair, a time of connection and a chance for your child to soften and find support, every single night. As children grow older, this really is something to treasure.



## 10. Your raise caring children.

The only real way to teach a child caring and empathy is through practice, not theory.

A baby whose needs are responded to without a question grows up with two beliefs:

1. I deserve love.
2. When people are in distress, they need help.

You will see your child rushing to help younger babies at the playground, and your heart will swell with pride.

School reports will mention what a great friend they are.

You will watch them blossom into a young person with dignity and empathy.

Then you will know that all those nighttime cuddles, your embodied love, helped you raise a good human.



Babies spend more than half of their time asleep. Your nurture at this time matters.

Don't let our culture's push for premature independence trick you out your wisdom, your intuition and your journey with your baby.

Don't let unrealistic expectations run your life, making you feel not enough.

To your baby, you are everything. The fact that you can soothe them with the sound of your voice, your warmth and your milk, is your superpower.

The fact that your nurture is exactly what they need for amazing brain development is nature's beautiful design.

And independent sleep? Let it surprise you when it comes. For now, just focus on having some good sleep – it's absolutely possible even with a baby or toddler...



**If sleep is hard but you're not willing to compromise on nurture, this is what Nurture Neuroscience sleep coaching exists for.**

I would be honoured to support you as you...

- resolve frequent wakings and / or long wakings
- streamline difficult bedtimes with your baby or older child
- improve naps
- ease separation anxiety at bedtime
- introduce a new caregiver to support your baby with sleep / change where your baby / toddler sleeps
- night wean gently (from 24 months)
- support sleep as your family is going through changes (going back to work, welcoming a new baby, separation, and more)

**Book your free 15-minute consultation [HERE](#) and explore what gentle, evidence-based support could look like for your family.**

*In your corner,*

*Olga*

*Nurture Neuroscience Sleep Consultant*



## References

Ball, H.L. (2025) How Babies Sleep: A Factful Guide to the first 365 Days and Nights. Penguin Random House UK

Hardyment, C. (2007). Dream Babies: Childcare Advice from John Locke to Gina Ford. Frances Lincoln

Kirshenbaum, G. (2023) Nurture Revolution: Grow Your Baby's Brain and Transform Their Mental Health through the Art of Nurtured Parenting. Grand Central Publishing.

McKenna, J.J.(2020) Safe Infant Sleep: Expert Answers to Your Cosleeping Questions. Platypus Publishing

