

Bringing Up Baby: Cuddling vs. Coddling...Secure vs. Spoiled August 2005

WHAT'S CODDLING? WHAT'S NOT?

By Rebecca Stolcz

We posed some common situations to best selling author and parenting expert Nancy Samalin. Nancy is an Upper West Side mom who gives workshops for New York parents and travels the world, lecturing on parenting issues. She is the author of four books; her newest is *Loving Without Spoiling*. Her website address is: www.samalin.com.

SLEEP:

Getting your child to sleep

In the bed/crib, lights out, door closed or falling asleep on the sofa and transfer to crib/bed?

Ideally, unless you believe in co-sleeping, it's great if your child can learn how to sleep on her own. By eight o'clock, most normal parents are exhausted and ready to sit down themselves. When children are able to go to bed on their own, it also makes it possible for the parent to relax. In addition, it's reassuring for a child to become familiar with a certain routine. This is what we have to teach our children to do. It's not always easy, but necessary.

Waking up at night

Letting baby cry it out or picking baby up to soothe?

If a baby is usually a good sleeper and is unusually upset —he may have had a bad dream, or have a stomachache, or be upset in some way — then it's OK to go in and pick up the baby. But if a child is simply whimpering, or bored, it is unnecessary to go in. It comes down to the difference between 'need' and 'want'. You have to use your judgment to decipher whether your child really needs soothing and nurturing, or if he just wants attention. The statement 'letting a child cry it out' can become a dangerous one, because there is also a difference between a child wailing for 45 minutes — and simply whining or complaining for your company.

Middle of the night

In parents' bed, or sent back to room?

There are two schools of thought-: a family bed or co-sleeping. The majority of parents want their children sleeping on their own. If you're not a single parent, and you're living with another adult, it would be nice if you could share your bed with your partner. You need to create both structure and limits with the child. This really falls into the category of want vs. need. I don't criticize parents who allow their child to sleep in their beds if they're doing what they want to do. In the short run, they may have a better night's sleep, but this may cause problems in the long run.

WEANING FROM BREAST TO BOTTLE/CUP:

When mom's ready to do so, or when baby's ready?

It doesn't matter whether the mother or baby is the first to want to stop. It is all about mutual respect. It may be a pleasurable experience for the mother and a nutritional need for the baby, but once the baby is ready to stop, we need to respect his wishes. For instance, when a child stops showing interest in the breast and starts showing interest in bottle or cup, you need to give them that respect even though it may be hard for you and you wish this stage could go on for much longer. Moving on from the breast is a natural developmental stage, and the mother should encourage it to progress.

EATING:

Eating what's put on the table or making a separate meal for finicky eaters?

I do not believe in making a separate meal for finicky eaters. The only people you should make a separate meal for are a spouse, a lover, or yourself. Becoming a short-order cook for a fussy eater can be a waste of time, since no child will ever say, "I really loved what you cooked and I appreciate it that you made something new." However, I don't believe in forcing kids to eat. If you put chicken and pasta on their plate and they don't want to eat it, just tell them they don't have to. Then if the child says she's hungry, you can tell her she can fix herself something else, and point her to the peanut butter or the yogurt in the fridge. If you're able to remain very cool and unemotional about what your child eats and doesn't eat, you probably won't have power struggles over meals.

TOY/ROOM CLEAN UP!

Supervising child to do this or quickly doing it yourself?

By doing it yourself, you will not help your child to learn. It would be great if they did it alone, but you will most likely need to help them out, even if it's easier to just do it yourself. Ideally, it would be easiest if your kids had fewer toys — but that is not very likely. Without the surplus of toys, there would be less of a mess to have to clean up. However, since you have to pick your battles, it may be that this is something not worth fighting about.

MORE POINTS-OF-VIEW

We also asked some other area parenting experts to weigh in on these situations.

—Brooklyn psychotherapist Elliott Schuman, Ph.D. is a member of the psychology department faculty at Long Island University; he is a supervisor in the psychiatry department of Mt. Sinai Hospital; and he maintains a private practice in Park Slope.

—Dr. Nadia Diaz-Balardini is a Forest Hills clinical psychologist, and the mother of a toddler.

—Dr. Eve Lazar Burkhardt has a private practice in Chappaqua, and specializes in working with parents.

SLEEPING ISSUES:

- Dr. Diaz-Balardini: If you want to get your child used to sleeping in her own room, it helps to have a consistent pre-bedtime routine and to make the child an active part of it. For example, the routine can simply consist of dinner, bath, brushing teeth and reading a book.

There are several techniques one can try to help a child to go and stay asleep — in her own

bed — but it is important to keep in mind that there are individual differences among babies and children. In other words, what works for one child may not work for another, and vice versa.

One widely used technique is Dr. Richard Ferber's method. He suggests a "progressive" approach to teach your child to fall asleep and sleep through the night. Briefly, he suggests that after a loving pre-bedtime routine, you put your child to bed while she's still awake. Once you put her in bed, leave the room. If she cries, wait a certain amount of time before you check on her (e.g. 5 minutes). When you do go back to her room, comfort her without picking her up or feeding her. Gradually increase the amount of time that passes between checks (e.g., 5 minutes, then 10 minutes, then 15 minutes, and so on). It is crucial to be very patient and consistent. This technique usually works in about a week. It is also important to rule out other conditions such as illness, pain, or stress that may be interfering with the child's sleep. Also, if your child is old enough, it may help giving your child a transitional object or "security blanket" such as a stuffed animal, toy, or blanket to sleep with. Do not allow her to sleep in your bed.

- Dr. Burkhardt: Falling asleep is a skill that children need to learn. Infants should not be left to cry because they have no concept of time and don't know that you will return to them. But for children ages 1-2 and up, have your nighttime ritual of bedtime stories for a certain amount of time, then put the child to bed. Keep the lights on and the door open if she's scared. If she's too afraid to fall asleep, place a chair outside her room, sit there with your back to her and read, but don't speak to her or allow her to talk to you.

Do not put a child to bed by staying with her until she falls asleep or lie down with her. This prevents her from learning to fall asleep, and leaves no time for yourself and your mate. It's important for a child to see that your mate comes first.

As for your child waking up and crying at night, this does not have a black-and-white answer. You need to find out why he's waking up. If he's scared, put a sleeping bag outside your door and let him lie there provided he doesn't make any noise. If he's getting up simply for company, let him cry.

If a child gets out of bed and won't stay in her room even after you take her back, put a gate on her door. If she can climb over it, put one gate on top of the other. If she's getting out of her bed because she's scared, you can use the sleeping bag technique.

Absolutely do not allow her to sleep in your bed.

EATING ISSUES:

- Dr. Schuman: This is what I learned: My first job when I first became a psychologist was at a camp where I was the counselor for a group of 11-year-olds. One of the kids was labeled a finicky eater by both the parents and the camp. While he was under my care for two months, I let him eat whatever he wanted and never forced him to eat. When the parents came to visit, they were amazed at how relaxed he was about eating. Kids are better off when their parents are happy and comfortable enough with themselves to be able to pass on their own relaxed mien to their children. You want to give them the message that they should enjoy food as much as you do. Like any rule, there are always exceptions; if it is very important for your happiness and psychological well being that your children have all the nutrients you believe they should be getting, you want to do the following: Suppose you want your child to have broccoli. Don't ask the child, "Would you like to have broccoli?", because if the child says 'no', then you will be unhappy — and you want to be happy. Therefore, the appropriate question is, "Would you like to have your broccoli now, or in 10 minutes?" It's always better to give people, including children, a choice — but the choice should not be 'no' or 'yes'. The choice should be 'now' or 'in a (X minutes)'. This way, the child is getting a choice, and you are getting the assurance that your child is going to ingest the broccoli. Always start with a small amount of what you want to introduce to ensure that they'll work up a desire for it in the

future.

- Dr. Diaz-Balardini: If your child is getting a well balanced diet — and you can check this with your pediatrician — you should not worry about her skipping a meal; she will compensate nutritionally with the next meal. Quarreling about food is likely to lead to power struggles, a lot of frustration and anxiety, and sometimes even to the development of eating disorders. Research in the area recommends not using food as a reward or punishment. It is important to separate discipline (eating behavior) from nutrition (food intake). You can prevent mealtimes from becoming a battleground by dealing with your own feelings of frustration and offering good food to your child without forcing it down. Also, make her feel that she is an active part of eating, let her try to eat by herself, and offer help only if she indicates she needs help. It is very difficult for a toddler, for instance, to sit still through a whole family meal. Let her sit and eat as much as he needs, and then get down to play when he's ready to do so.

WEANING:

- Dr. Diaz-Balardini: When the baby refuses to breastfeed — either gradually or suddenly — it doesn't necessarily mean that the baby is ready to wean. It is important to rule out possible causes of a "nursing strike". These causes could be pain, illness, overuse of pacifier or bottle, over-stimulating environment, distraction, stress, to name just a few. Patience and persistence are the keys to getting a baby back to the breast. If either mother or baby becomes frustrated when the breast is offered, you can stop and try again later. Attempts to breastfeed should be kept as pleasant as possible, so that the baby will associate breastfeeding with positive feelings. Weaning should be a natural process and does not have to be a stressful event for the mother or the child. If the baby continuously refuses the breast before it seems the right time to wean, consult with your pediatrician or a lactation specialist.

- Dr. Burkhardt: For children under age 2, breastfeeding is a good, warm experience for both mother and child. But if the mother starts feeling as if she's ready to wean, she should listen to her own needs — otherwise she will start to feel resentful. She should then wean the child gradually.

TOYS/ROOM CLEAN-UP:

- Dr. Schuman: You do not do it yourself or the child will never learn to be responsible. You need to tell the child that you want these toys picked up — and then ask for their suggestions how to get the room to look neater and more organized.

- Dr. Diaz-Balardini: It is important to keep in mind that developmentally, children really clean up their toys at about age 4. Nevertheless, you can encourage your child to "help" put the toys away, in a playful way. Make the task reasonable for the age of the child. With little children, you may end up doing most of the work at first. As they get older, let them do more and more. If they feel like they are contributing, this will create a positive self-image, and the inclination to help out. Give an advance warning of the task — young children especially have a hard time making transitions from one activity to another. Saying, "In a little bit it will be time to pick up so we can have dinner," could make the transition easier for them from playing to cleaning. Break the big task into manageable little tasks and make it a game (you can use singing, counting, etc., and work along with the child; you can pick up the books and she can pick up the blocks). Use modeling and praise. You can also link cleaning up with something fun (a reward at the end of the task). If you decide to set consequences if your child refuses to clean up (e.g., putting what the child was playing with out of reach) be consistent; decide on a course of action and follow through. And lastly, set a good example by keeping your own room — and the rest of the house — clean.

- Dr. Burkhardt: For children under age 2, you should clean up together and make it a fun experience. When children attend nursery school or day care and start to learn about cleaning up, you can give your child the task of cleaning up a small portion of her room. If she rebels,

use a timer for the clean-up. If the timer goes off and there are still toys she hasn't cleaned up, don't complain or nag, but simply put them into a bag and hide it. Do this every day and eventually she will realize that some of her favorite toys are gone. Soon she'll start finishing clean-up ahead of the timer, at which point you can return some of her toys.

Never do the child's clean up-all by yourself because eventually you will become resentful.

THE LAST GOOD WORD:

On a general note, adds Dr. Schuman, parents "should deal with their children's developmental stages by taking care of themselves. I have found that parents are more likely to make mistakes when they take care of others before themselves. Children will start developing responsibility through their parents. This is called 'modeling', when they learn to take care of themselves before others. I call this 'good selfishness'.