

## Baby and Toddler Sleep “Problems”?

By Corné Waldeck

It is a myth that babies are capable of sleeping through the night. It is normal and healthy for infants and young children to wake during the night and need attention from their parents. This should not be labelled a “sleep problem”. They need their parent next to them to calm them, to bring their stress hormone levels down, and to regulate their immature brain and body systems.

When a child becomes distressed, their adrenal glands produce the stress hormone cortisol. If a parent repeatedly does not respond to a child’s cries, the child can learn to stop crying. They learn to give up, they learn that they are helpless to change their situation, they learn that they are not worthy to be listened to. So, even when they have been trained to stop crying, their cortisol levels will still spike if not comforted. The long term effects of such repeated separation distress is an extreme sensitivity to stress. Adults with this hypersensitivity find it either difficult to calm themselves down, or on the other hand, may “de-activate” their emotions in stressful situations.

### References:

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The Australian Association of Infant Mental Health. (2013). Position Paper 1: Controlled Crying.  
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There are no long term health or developmental problems caused by babies waking at night. Responding to an infant’s needs and their crying will not lead to a lasting “bad habit” but will contribute to the child’s sense of security and self-worth. Children with responsive parents are likely to be securely attached and grow up to be more independent, have higher self-esteem, healthier relationships and better resilience to psychological stress.

Furthermore, children who receive plenty of reassurance and gentle touch at bedtime produce calming brain chemicals (oxytocin and opioids), helping them to sleep peacefully.