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Each baby has a different sleep need. There is remarkable variation in sleep needs and sleeping patterns from baby to baby. So much so, in fact, that comparing your baby to others or aiming for a specific number of hours of sleep is likely to be unhelpful. When the obstacles to healthy sleep have been removed, your baby can be trusted to take the amount of sleep that your baby needs. Because sleeping needs and patterns are individual and different from baby to baby, it is important that you experiment in order to work out what works best for you and your baby. Sleep is a natural biological rhythm. Our sleep patterns, and our baby's sleep patterns, are biologically regulated. Sleep has a rhythm as natural and as powerful as the tides. In fact, there are two aspects to this force: your homeostatic sleep pressure and your circadian clock. The homeostatic sleep pressure is a biological need for sleep that builds the longer you go without sleep. Eventually, sleep pressure

becomes irresistible. The circadian clock is our biological sense of time throughout the day and it is the circadian clock that allows sleep to consolidate during night-time. The circadian clock doesn't automatically know the time, however - it relies upon receiving accurate cues, such as sunlight in the morning, noise, stimulation and activity throughout the day. Baby (and parent) sleep can become difficult when these powerful biological forces become out of sync with each other or out of sync with real time or when we struggle against these natural forces. We can prevent these unnecessary difficulties by living a lifestyle that supports the healthy operation of our and our baby's biological rhythms. Help your baby's sleep to consolidate at night, by ensuring that your baby's homeostatic sleep pressure has built sufficiently by bedtime to allow for sleep. If it is a struggle to get your baby to sleep at night, consider experimenting with shorter daytime naps or a later bedtime.

Help your baby's circadian rhythm to keep in sync with real time by ensuring that your baby gets accurate cues: sunlight in the morning, a regular time to start the day, daytime naps in the same room as you with normal daylight and noise, and plenty of daytime stimulation. Stress and anxiety interfere with sleep. Stress, anxiety and the up-regulation of the sympathetic nervous system can interfere with sleep, even when a sufficient sleep need has built. Healthy sleep can be promoted with relaxation and the down-regulation of the sympathetic nervous system. Your baby's relaxation is best supported by meeting your baby's needs for milk and stimulation. Babies often fall asleep after feeds, and this is completely natural: the hormones of satiety and relaxation allow the baby's natural biological rhythms to take over and baby drifts off to sleep. Babies also hunger for sensory stimulation and satisfying this drive brings relaxation, too. The best way to meet your baby's hunger for stimulation

# Four Radical Truths About Parents, Babies & Sleep

By Dr Koa Whittingham - Author of *Becoming Mum*  
Dr Pamela Douglas

When it comes to babies and sleep it seems like there aren't a lot of options. You are probably familiar with the option of teaching your baby to self-settle, which is done in a structured way. If that doesn't seem like the answer to you, or if you aren't comfortable with teaching self-settling because you feel your baby is too young, the only option left seems to be to simply accept your baby's current sleep patterns and your own exhaustion. While a realistic view of baby's sleep is absolutely beneficial (babies do wake during the night), parent-baby sleep can also become unnecessarily disrupted. Unnecessary disruptions can be minimised by understanding four little-known and yet scientifically supported truths about sleep:



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is to live a rich and enjoyable life yourself, with baby in tow: social activities, time outside in the fresh air, regular exercise and activities that you enjoy. Note that if your baby feeds very frequently day and night, your baby may be experiencing a feeding rather than a sleeping difficulty and it is important to seek professional support.

Stress and anxiety may interfere with your sleep too. Find enjoyable ways to build regular relaxation into your day: yoga, meditation, abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or even a good book or a warm bath. When you are having difficulty sleeping it is only natural to think anxious thoughts about this. Unfortunately, if we get hooked by these anxious thoughts this can make sleep even less likely! Instead,

let any anxious thoughts come and go without getting caught up in them.

Parental sleep quality is not determined by number of times a baby wakes. In fact, breastfeeding mothers get more and better quality of sleep even though breastfeeding babies wake more frequently. Waking several times a night is normal, not just for babies, but for adults. Most adults wake several times a night, even if they don't remember that in the morning. Good quality sleep is not about whether or not you wake during the night, but how quickly and easily you slip back into sleep once woken. When responding to your baby during the night, do so in a relaxed, even lazy way, keeping yourself calm and sleepy. Avoid looking at the clock or counting how many times you have woken because this may only escalate your anxiety, and make it difficult to fall back asleep once your baby is settled. Instead, enjoy holding, feeding and soothing your baby, focus on the pleasure of contact, the warmth, their sweet smell. You might like to practice relaxation or meditation as you settle your baby to keep your body relaxed and your mind calm.

It is normal for babies to wake during the night. It is also normal for babies to gradually self-settle at night with maturation – it's often not understood that by the end of the first year, most babies are going back to sleep when they wake during the night without any need for self-settling programs. Yet parent-baby sleep can also become unnecessarily disrupted. It is possible to improve parent-baby sleep without teaching your baby self-settling by understanding how sleep is biologically regulated. Remember, every baby is unique, so experiment with how you can best put these truths into practice in your family. By doing so, you can ensure that you all get the best night's sleep possible.

And, if it all becomes too much, seek help from organisations that follow gentle techniques, such as Possums Sleep Intervention or The Baby Sleep Company.

*Dr Koa Whittingham (www.koawhittingham.com), psychologist and author of Becoming Mum, and Dr Pamela Douglas, GP and author of The Discontented Little Baby Book, are the developers of a new approach to parent-baby sleep called the Possums Sleep Intervention. To access the full intervention go to: [www.possumsonline.com](http://www.possumsonline.com).*

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