

The Myth of Self-Settling
Outer Womb – Sarah Ockwell-Smith
Pathways #43, page 24



Talking Points

- ❖ Has anyone else noticed the huge blow-up in sleep training infants in the media lately? “Many experts tell sleep-deprived parents how vitally important it is to teach the ‘skill’ of self-soothing to their offspring as soon as possible. But what if I told you that babies can’t self-soothe? Babies are no more capable of self-settling than they are of riding a bike.” (24)
- ❖ Sleep training conditions babies not to cry out for attention and go to sleep without their parent fairly easily. This behavior does not mean your baby is calm, soothed or settled.
- ❖ You can’t teach babies something that their brains are not ready for. “Self-soothing is a developmental stage, a skill that infants gain as they grow older, just as they become more physically mobile, develop the ability to eat solids and develop the ability to talk.” (24)
- ❖ There are three main ways to cope with our strong emotions:
 - Approach – “our desire to approach those things, or people, who help us feel emotionally safe and secure. In terms of your baby, that person is you.”
 - Attack or Avoid – commonly known as “fight-flight;” “something happens that causes us alarm and our bodies react to help us to either stay and fight or run for our lives.” (25)
- ❖ Babies will naturally want to approach you “(usually by crying for physical contact with you), particularly when they are not emotionally or physically developed enough to attack or avoid.” (25) This does not mean they are “clingy” or “manipulative,” this is not a bad habit that needs to be broken. Babies have emotional needs, just like you and me, that are just as valid as their physical needs.
- ❖ The baby’s brain is physically not developed enough to be able to regulate emotion. Their brain is about the quarter of its adult size and lacking development in the areas of the brain necessary to “self-soothe.” (see page 25 for an in depth explanation)

- ❖ So what happens when you do sleep train? Your babies are freezing in order to preserve homeostasis (preserve life.) They are still stressed and are neither soothed nor settled no matter how quiet or “calm” they appear.
- ❖ Sarah Ockwell-Smith reminds us that “Research shows that the more nurturing you are toward your child in their early years, the greater their hippocampal volume. That’s important, because the hippocampus is related to behavioral regulation.” So, “the best way to ensure a child grows to have good emotional self-regulation is by responding to them as much as they need when they are young.” (26)
- ❖ How do you stay calm and attend to your child even when it just doesn’t seem possible? How do you encourage new moms to?

Resources

Full references for each article are available at <http://pathwaystofamilywellness.org/references.html>

Sarah Ockwell-Smith is the founder on the parenting website <http://www.gentleparenting.co.uk/>

An interview with Marcy Axness, Ph.D. and James J. McKenna, Ph.D by Gena Kirby in response to the frightening new method to help newborns sleep through the night (“The Newborn Sleep Book”) reported on FOX news (<http://www.foxnews.com/health/2014/08/13/new-method-to-help-newborns-sleep-through-night/>). The interview can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2PfSaHwSco&feature=share>

James J. McKenna, Ph.D.’s website that is intended to give scientifically –based information. It is a great resource for FAQs in regards western infant sleep and feeding issues, with an emphasis on mother-infant cosleeping, breastfeeding, SIDS/SUDI risk factors, and prevention, all in relationship to sleeping arrangements including separate- surface-cosleeping and bedsharing. <http://cosleeping.nd.edu/>

An interview with James J. McKenna – “Co-Sleeping with Infants: Science, Public Policy, and Parents Civil Rights” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCZzqFkyiU&list=UU-GNINvg-w62McRprdrEZQ>

“Crying for Comfort: Distressed Babies Need to be Held” by Aletha Solter, Ph.D.
<http://pathwaystofamilywellness.org/The-Outer-Womb/crying-for-comfort-distressed-babies-need-to-be-held.html>