

Trained Night Feeder

from Barton Schmitt

Most babies wake four or five times each night. When parents entertain their infant during these "normal" awakenings, the infant cannot learn to comfort and quiet him or herself back to sleep. Babies who are placed in their cribs asleep expect their parents to be there when they wake-up. Early on, parents need to teach their newborn how to soothe themselves to sleep. By 2 to 3 months of age, 90 percent of babies have attained that important milestone - a good night sleep for both child and parent! Those infants who do not sleep the entire night are referred to as either "trained night criers" or "trained night feeders." The "trained night crier," according to The University of Colorado's Dr. Barton Schmitt, wants to be held and entertained following normal nighttime awakenings, and the "trained night feeder" wants to be fed as well as held in the middle of the night. Neither child has learned how to calm and soothe him or herself back to sleep. Three factors that contribute to a child becoming a "trained night crier" are: 1) rocking the baby to sleep; 2) entertaining the baby during the night; and 3) not letting the baby cry it out. One way from preventing a newborn from becoming a "trained night crier" is to always put him or her to bed awake. Infants who are rocked to sleep and then put in their crib expect their parents to be there when they wake up. Put the child in his or her crib sleepy so that the child's last waking memory is the crib, not the parents. When the "trained night crier" wakes up at three in the morning, letting the baby "cry it out" is easier said than done. Parents who can endure crying during the day are usually not as tolerant in the middle of the night. In addition, the crying baby may wake up an older brother or sister. Other adults may complain, especially if the family lives in an apartment or shares the house with the in-laws. The parent who has to get up in the morning and go to work finds the nighttime crying unbearable. So, the child is removed from the crib, the crying pays off, and the sleep disorder gets worse.

The treatment of the "trained night crier," Dr. Schmitt recommends, consists of boring, brief (one to two minutes) visits to the baby's room. Parents should not turn on the light nor lift the child out of the crib. A few soothing words and a gentle touch are all that is needed. If necessary, a wet or soiled diaper can be quickly changed in the crib. Occasionally the visit intensifies the crying since the child becomes angry that the parents are leaving the room without giving in. If the child continues to cry, do not return for at least 15 minutes, gradually stretching the interval between visits by 10 minutes each time. Watch the clock, since a minute of crying at three in the morning can seem like an eternity. If the crib is in the parents' bedroom, move it to a separate room until the problem resolves, if possible. Most babies will cry less each night until finally learning to put themselves back to sleep. Prolonged crying (even 30 minutes or longer) will not physically or psychologically harm your baby. According to Dr. Schmitt, babies are quick learners and sleep habits will improve

in less than a week. Dr. Schmitt describes the “trained night feeder” as an infant who wakes up to be fed one or more times every night. The factors that contribute to this condition are: worrying that the infant is hungry, feeding the baby until he or she falls asleep at night, and leaving a bottle in the crib at night. Many parents feed their babies when they wake up at night because they believe the child needs the calories. By the time normal children reach 13-15 pounds, they can go eight consecutive hours without feeding. These children, therefore, do not need any additional calories during the night to remain healthy.

When an infant begins to act sleepy, stop feeding him or her and put the child into bed awake. The baby’s last waking memory needs to be the crib and the mattress, not the bottle or the breast. If not, the infant cannot return to sleep during periods of normal waking at night without being fed, and a “trained night feeder” is born. Parents who leave a bottle in the crib as a security object are putting their child at risk for both sleep and dental problems. When this child wakes up following normal awakenings, the infant uses the contents of the bottle to soothe him or herself back to sleep. No problem until the bottle runs dry and the child cries for a refill. In addition, leaving a bottle in the crib can lead to severe tooth decay known as "milk bottle caries." The “trained night feeder” is actually a “trained night crier” who demands a feeding as well as entertainment to go to sleep. Therefore, parents must deal with this problem by phasing out any feedings after 11 p.m. This can be done safely as soon as the infant is about 13 pounds. When the baby wakes next at night and appears hungry, follow the guidelines mentioned above for treating the "trained night crier," and do not offer any feedings. This will teach the child to put him or herself to sleep without feeding.