Introduction

Your baby already knows how to sleep.

Our clients are always shocked when they hear this. They've been breaking a sweat rocking their baby into a deep slumber, waking up every two hours to feed throughout the night, or wringing their hands in frustration with a wide-eyed, nap-resistant toddler.

But it’s true. Sleep is a basic action that babies are naturally born to do. Their bodies crave healthy sleep, and their brains are wired for it. By five or six months of age, almost all babies are capable of sleeping well without much assistance from mom or dad.

So why do so many families struggle at night? The answer is that most parents do what works today, don’t notice when it’s no longer needed tomorrow, and then keep pushing even harder when it’s become a hindrance the day after that. They work overtime with all kinds of fanfare and tricks to put their babies to bed. We’ve heard it all: parents feeding, rocking, and bouncing on a yoga ball for 45 minutes every night, lying down with kids, re-tucking and refilling water glasses endlessly—one couple even told us they found themselves putting on a full music show with guitars, singing, and lights every night before bedtime.

Over time, parents’ “helping ways” overshadow their baby’s natural sleep abilities. Children get confused as to whether they or their parents are doing the soothing, and parents aren’t sure when and how much to back off so their little ones can take over the job.

*The Happy Sleeper* is the guide to doing just that. We will give you a clear, easy-to-follow system for transferring the role of independent sleep to your baby or child, as we’ve done for thousands of families in our combined 20 years in practice. If you’re consistent in how you apply the methods in this book, your baby or child’s sleep will improve dramatically within one to two weeks.

**Good sleep is in their genes**

Kids don’t need to be trained to sleep; they’re built to sleep. Think about it: sleep is like other areas of development, and you know how quickly your baby learns. Within a year, a baby can sit, pull to stand, and maybe take her first steps. She understands language and soon she’ll speak in sentences. Almost overnight, she’s a master in all realms.

So why should sleep be any different?

But over and over in our practice, we see that it is. Children take off in their motor, social, cognitive, and language skills, while sleep skills stall and even decline as the
months go on. It’s a common course for little kids—they show robust, thriving development in all other domains, but actually regress in their ability to sleep.

In the early months, this happens when a soothing technique like nursing or rocking to sleep works and becomes your go-to habit (and we don’t blame you!). The problem is that while newborns often need these soothing devices, they outgrow this need quickly as their natural self-soothing abilities grow—sometimes within a matter of days or weeks. With toddlers and kids, the same idea applies. We know that they can sleep, but milestones and life transitions (learning to climb out of the crib, starting preschool, or having nightmares) rock the boat just enough to warrant a new trick (like lying down with the child until they doze off) that kids quickly become reliant on.

As parents get stuck in a habit of soothing their little one to sleep, it masks the child’s natural abilities and makes it look as if she can’t sleep on her own.

Imagine your child was capable of walking, but you still carried her everywhere, instead of letting her practice this new skill! This overhelping is the crux of family sleep problems. Eventually parents become exasperated, while baby’s sleep potential has actually been stifled.

Why we wrote this book

We wrote this book to help solve a dilemma. Over and over in our parenting groups, we’ve seen moms and dads work diligently to be responsive and nurturing around sleep, only to become frustrated, exhausted, and confused as their baby’s sleep gets worse instead of better. These parents feel stuck, and many reach the end of their rope and turn to a harsh, shut-the-door-and-don’t-go-in approach.

We know that sleep is a natural, hard-wired function that shouldn’t be so difficult. As clinicians who follow science and new thinking on child development, we realized why sleep was stumping so many families—it’s the same overhelping or “helicopter parenting” dilemma that parents find themselves in elsewhere. Logic tells us (and research confirms) that overhelping doesn’t work: when we do things for our babies and kids that they are capable of doing for themselves, it keeps them from developing to their potential (in this case, their sleep potential). The problem is that, as parents, we don’t know how to stop overhelping, while still being warm and supportive to our kids.

The topic of baby sleep needs a fresh perspective. It’s been bogged down in old-school notions like “training,” and misunderstandings of basic concepts like attachment. In this book, we take an integrated approach that is sensitive, simple, and truly effective. We don’t want anyone suffering sleep deprivation unnecessarily, nor do we ever want a baby to feel alone or fearful. Happily, neither of these ever needs to happen.
Our methods are based on two logical, research-based ideas. One: babies and little kids need warmth, sensitivity, and a sense that the world is a safe place. Two: they thrive best (and sleep best) when they have structure, routine, and clear expectations. When we work with parents to fix a sleep issue, we always locate the solution in one of these two places. If one of these is missing, a child’s sleep ends up falling short of what she’s developmentally capable of: a 10-month old baby waking every 1-2 hours at night (you’d be surprised how many we’ve met!), an 18-month old who only naps in a stroller, or a child refusing to fall asleep unless mom or dad snuggle up too.

These parents swear that their child’s not capable, or is just a bad sleeper. But when we craft a sleep plan together (as we’ll do in this book), within a week or two their baby is sleeping 11 hours straight, their toddler is taking a beautiful 2-hour nap in her crib, or their child is kissing them goodnight, grabbing his stuffed animal, rolling over, and falling asleep on his own.

Sleep affects virtually every part of your child’s life. Well-rested babies and kids are emotionally balanced, flexible, and creative; they’re healthier; they think clearly and retain information better. When your child sleeps well, she (and you) feel the ripples of this everywhere. It’s amazing to see how good sleep transforms a family.

**How to use this book**

**Chapter 1** is an introduction to childhood sleep issues, including information about how much sleep your baby or child needs.  
**Chapter 2** outlines the Happy Sleeper approach to good sleep for all ages (babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and young school-age kids). This chapter explains the underlying ideas that all our methods are based on.  
**Chapters 3-5** have all the practical information, steps, and methods you need for your child’s particular age, and for any issue or goal you have with sleep.

- **Chapter 3** is for babies 0-4 months old  
- **Chapter 4** is for babies 5-24 months old  
- **Chapter 5** is for children 2-6 years old

Each of these chapters is organized this way:

**1. HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS**
This is the foundation for good sleep. If you put these habits in place, your child will have the best chance of sleeping well, both now and in the long run. Even if you’re looking for the answer to a specific problem, don’t skip over this section—these habits strongly influence the quality of your child’s sleep.
2. SLEEP SOLUTIONS
For every sleep issue in your child’s age range, we have a solution that is responsive and supportive and keeps your baby or child in charge of soothing and independent sleep (with the exception of little babies ages 0-4 months, who are gradually growing into this capacity).

3. TROUBLESHOOTING
What to do about teething, motor milestones, potty training, sleep regressions, and more? The last section of each chapter answers common questions that arise for your child’s age.

Chapter 6 addresses special situations like bed sharing, traveling, and other arrangements and circumstances that can change the way your child sleeps. Chapter 7 will help you, the parent, sleep well. We see too many parents sacrificing their own sleep needs. We want to help you make sleep a priority for you, not just your child. Chapter 8 explains the science of sleep and how sleep develops over the first years of life. The appendix has tools for creating your child’s schedule and tracking progress on your sleep plan. You’ll find more helpful tools on our website www.thehappysleeper.com.
CHAPTER ONE

The Happy Sleeper

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

You feed or rock your baby until she’s fast asleep, lower her gently into her crib, and tiptoe out of the room. Two hours later, she’s awake and calling for you.

It’s past bedtime, but your toddler runs when you try to put PJs on him, breaks down in tears over brushing teeth, and summons you back into the room repeatedly for more water, another song, and different stuffed animal configurations.

You have to lie down with your little one until he falls asleep, which can take up to 45 minutes and, sometimes, you doze off too.

Your baby will only nap in the stroller, car, or with you carrying her.

Your child stays up too late and you suspect he’s not getting enough sleep, but you can’t figure out how to get him into bed earlier.

Your child calls out to you at night and needs you to sleep with her, or to join you in your bed.

You and your partner are so exhausted you can barely function, much less be present or happy with your baby during waking hours.

Sleep is a basic building block of your family’s health and happiness—just like good food and regular exercise. Sleep is about as natural as it comes; in fact, kids are literally built to do it. Their brains are programmed for good sleep from the time they’re babies.

Your child wants to sleep; and with the right patterns in place, her natural abilities will surprise you. Naptime, bedtime, and sleeping through the night—they don’t have to be a big struggle, or a source of anxiety. As easy as it is to disrupt sleep and create unhealthy sleep habits, it’s achievable and often quick to get back on the right track. Consider this scene:

You help your baby wind down after her last feeding. You give her a bath and put on her PJs. After a few stories, a few cuddles, and a song, you kiss her goodnight, lower her into her crib, and leave the room. Your happy sleeper rolls over, grabs her lovey, moves into a comfortable sleep position, and drifts off until the next morning. You
have time to yourself to eat dinner, read a book, or spend time with your partner before going to bed and getting a full night’s sleep.

If your baby is over 5 months and you follow our approach consistently, you can go from one of the cumbersome patterns mentioned above, to this happy sleeper scene in roughly 1-2 weeks (if your baby is under 5 months, we’ll show you how to move in this direction). And if you read and adopt our fundamental concepts, your family will have a solid sleep foundation for years to come. It’s a myth that sleep is always a struggle, and that changing sleep patterns is very hard. If you have a clear plan, your family’s sleep can improve quickly.

Good sleep not only makes life more peaceful and enjoyable, it’s a basic need that affects your child’s happiness, success, and health. Insufficient sleep is like having a big piece of your life’s foundation missing; it’s like walking around while your body starves for food or water.

Did you know...

- Napping helps babies learn and remember language.
- Missing sleep compromises the brain’s prefrontal cortex, which our kids need for decision-making, attention, and emotional control.
- Little kids who sleep less than 10 hours/night are twice as likely to have low scores on cognitive tests when they enter school.
- Too little sleep in childhood increases the risk of obesity.

Sleepy Nation: You are not alone

Little kids are losing critical hours of sleep. It’s estimated that babies and young children get an average of 9.5 hours of sleep per night, although experts agree they need 11-12, and roughly one-third of kids have clinical sleep problems. A poll from the National Sleep Foundation found that half of infants and a third of toddlers get less sleep than their parents think they need. Seventy five percent of parents with infants and 82 percent of parents with preschoolers say they would change something about their child’s sleep.

Caffeinated drinks are consumed by lots of sleepy adults and, if you can believe it, kids! The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that children ages 6-10 drink caffeinated beverages 8 out of 10 days. One study found that two thirds of children ages 2-5 consumed drinks like soda and tea.

Why don’t kids sleep enough? There are lots of answers to this question, but here are two of the most common:
- We get confusing messages about sleep: Cry-it-out, tough love; feed-on-demand, co-sleep...parenting approaches seem to contradict each other, and leave many families puzzled and sleepless.

- We’re busy: Life is bursting at the seams! Especially for families with older children, homework, technology, activities, and work schedules make it hard to protect aspects of healthy sleep like early, consistent bedtimes. Artificial lights and electronics delay sleep for children and adults, keeping us all up past our optimal bedtimes. Even though sleep should come naturally, our modern lives easily disrupt it.

Kids don’t necessarily grow out of sleep issues either; in fact, research suggests that a significant percentage of young children with sleep disruptions still have them years later.

On the other hand, when you develop healthy sleep habits early, they grow with your child. Imagine that your baby, who is a self-soother, turns into a happy preschooler who feels confident and knows what to do when the lights go out, a school-age child who can have a sleepover at a friend’s house, and eventually a well-rested and sharp teen who’s set up for success. It’s not an overstatement to say that the positive sleep foundation you establish for your young child will be the one he has throughout his life.

**How much sleep does your family need?**

Take a look at sleep recommendations for every member of your family, including yourself. Just as with adults, children vary in how much sleep they need to function at their best, which is why there's a range instead of a magic number. But almost all children consistently need this amount of sleep in a 24-hour period. It’s a lot of sleep—roughly half your child’s life or more! A very small percentage of people are thought to be “short sleepers,” or those who require less sleep than the rest of us. If your child seems fine with less than the recommended amount of sleep, you might be surprised that she does even better with 30-60 minutes more. Think about the fact that your goal is not just a child who is *functioning*, but one who is optimally alert, creative, and balanced.

**How to tell if your child is getting enough sleep**

It can be tricky to tell whether your child is well rested, because kids rarely communicate this clearly. Insufficient sleep in children is hard to spot for two reasons:

- Babies and little kids don’t wind down when they’re tired—they wind up. Anyone who’s watched overtired kids run circles around a bouncy house, or
throw a tantrum insisting on more television before bed will tell you this is true. Babies get overstimulated and fussy when they’re tired (as you’ll see in Chapter 3, that’s a big reason for the early evening “witching hour”). Sleep loss in older children is linked with symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

- Kids aren’t good judges of their own sleepiness. In one well-known set of children’s sleep studies at Stanford, when kids’ sleep was restricted to just 4 hours a night, they still didn’t say they were sleepy. You really can’t count on your child to tell you when he’s tired—he needs you to help him wind down and sleep.

Overt sleepiness is especially hard to detect when little ones are on the move; sometimes it’s only obvious when they finally sit still—for example riding in a car or sitting on the couch reading a book. This is when you’ll see signals of drowsiness, like your child rubbing his eyes or staring into space.