



Sleep problems: the importance of setting boundaries

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Take the case of Janet and her five-month old son, Toby. Toby started waking up two or three times a night. Cuddles, rocking, creeping out of the room, and even trips out in the family car seemed to have no effect. Janet's only respite was when Toby eventually cried himself to sleep. Janet found that family life was becoming more and more chaotic. She was tired and frustrated. Toby was becoming a clingy and anxious child. Above all, Janet felt that Toby was in control, rather than the other way round.

Janet's story is not unusual. Many parents with young children experience sleep problems and are finally forced to take action when they are at their wit's end. As a parent, though, you can do something to avoid facing challenges like these, right from the beginning. From the moment your baby is born, he or she needs to know the limits of behaviour that is acceptable and that which is not. By saying "no" to unacceptable behaviour, you are setting boundaries for your baby. Setting boundaries will allow you to create an environment which has well-defined limits. It is one in which your child will feel safe and secure.

The role of boundaries in dealing with sleep problems cannot be overstated. Left alone in their bedroom at night, babies may appear to become anxious and clingy. How do you set boundaries and what boundaries should you create? Practical boundaries should reflect your own family values. For example, most parents want their baby to grow up to be confident, independent. Creating boundaries can help

you to achieve that goal. Setting boundaries about night waking gives your baby a set of rules to follow as part of an overall strategy. He or she will know that it's not good to cry or to play in the night. From your behaviour they will know that it's better to go back to sleep without a fuss. When it comes to setting boundaries for night-time waking, here are some steps you can take.

1. Take steps to avoid night-waking

Avoiding night-waking in the first place is an obvious starting point. For example, make sure that your baby feeds well during the day, so that he or she will not wake up in the night feeling hungry. Try to make sure that your baby is active during the day, so that he or she is not ready and raring to go when the rest of the household is fast asleep. Check the temperature in your baby's bedroom. A room that is too hot or too cold could be the reason why your baby wakes up during night. Of course, you may already feel that you have addressed these sorts of issues. If so, you can move onto the next step.

2. Work out a routine

In other words, work out a few ground rules about what you consider to be reasonable behaviour – what you are going to do should your baby awake during the night. Remember that your expectations should be reasonable and appropriate for the age of your baby. For example, you may decide to leave your child to cry for between 10 and 30 minutes, depending on how overtired they were when you put them down. At regular 10-minute intervals, check that your baby is alright, but make sure that you do so at a distance. If you're tempted to go in and give them a cuddle, then



just remember that you have a really good incentive not to - the chance for all the family to get a good night's rest.

3. Put up a united front

Boundaries and consistency go hand in hand. Your baby will begin to absorb the 'signals' that you are sending out – even if you're not aware that you're doing this. If you, as their parent, send out inconsistent signals or mixed messages about what you expect of them, how can you expect your child to work out what is actually right?

4. Always stay firm

Don't give in! You've made your mind up what you're going to do. Now you have to make sure that you don't waiver. That way, your baby knows that you mean business. Setting boundaries and sticking to them is tough. Friends and family may try to change your mind. Your baby may push against their limits. Listening to your baby crying can be difficult. As a parent, you have to be strong.

5. Enjoy the rewards!

Of course, it's only natural that your baby may still on the odd occasion wake up during the night. The difference now, though, is that he or she knows that it's not acceptable to play, and that it is safe to go back to sleep.

Setting boundaries doesn't just apply to sleep problems, such as night-waking. The basic steps outlined above are equally relevant to a whole range of challenges that many parents face on a daily basis. Many parents are reluctant to set boundaries – and stick to them – because of feelings of guilt. There is no reason to feel guilty. Just remind yourself that you're only doing your duty as a parent. You're taking steps to protect your child and help them learn to grow up as independent people with a positive outlook on life.