Sleep & Infant Mental Health: How are they Connected?

Created by: Kate Villanueva, Year 3 Nursing Student, Toronto Metropolitan University, Centennial, George Brown Collaborative Nursing Degree Program

Why Does Sleep Matter for Infant Mental Health?



Your baby's mental health is an important part of their overall well-being, and sleep plays a big role in it—just like food, love, and care. Sleep helps babies' brains grow, strengthens their memory, and creates a sense of safety and happiness. But sometimes, babies have trouble sleeping, which can affect their mood and even impact the whole family. You might wonder, 'What should I do?' or 'How can I help my baby sleep better?' These are common questions, and you're not alone!

This handout will explain how sleep supports your baby's development, why it matters for their mental health, what to know about common sleep challenges, infant sleep cycles, and safe sleep practices.

Connection between Sleep and Brain Development

- Sleep is essential for their brain development, memory function, and learning abilities. Many research studies have discussed how sleep is related to a baby's overall brain development.
- During infancy, a baby's brain is growing fast, and sleep helps build important connections needed for learning and development.
- Research shows that while babies sleep, their brains are busy strengthening memory, language skills, and problem-solving abilities. Sleep also plays a key role in organizing these brain changes, which can shape how a child learns and develops later in life.



How does Sleep Impact Emotional Regulation and Attachment?

- Sleep plays a big role in helping babies manage their emotions and form strong bonds with their parents/caregivers.
- Well-rested babies are often calmer, more curious, and better able to engage with the world around them. Sleep also helps babies feel safe and secure, which strengthens their attachment to parents and caregivers.
- When babies don't get enough sleep, they may be harder to soothe, and less able to handle stress. Over time, poor sleep can make it harder for babies to develop trust and emotional connections, which are important for healthy development.



Please note: Every baby is different, and their sleep needs can vary based on their growth and development. This handout is not a one-size-fits-all guide but provides general information to help you understand infant sleep. Families also have different routines and approaches, so it's important to find what works best for you and your baby.

References:
Clinton et al. (2014), Jiang, F. (2020), Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (n.d.), Ruggieri, A. (2022).

Common Sleep Challenges



Many babies experience sleep challenges, like:

- Trouble falling asleep on their own
- Frequent night wakings
- Sleep regressions (temporary disruption of sleep).

These can be caused by growth spurts, teething, sleep transitions, changes in routine, or developmental milestones. Every baby is different, **but creating a consistent bedtime routine** and a calm sleep environment can help improve sleep over time.

Understanding Infant Sleep Cycles

Babies sleep differently from adults. Their sleep cycles are shorter, and they spend more time in light sleep, which is why they wake up more often. As they grow, their sleep cycles get longer, and they start sleeping more deeply.

Birth - 3 months

- Newborns don't have a set day-and-night sleep pattern yet, so they sleep in short bursts throughout the day and night. Most of their sleep is light (active sleep), and they wake often for feeding, being worried, or crying. It is important to respond to your baby's cues during this time. Night wakings for feeding are normal and don't require sleep training. By 2-3 months, babies start developing a sleep rhythm and gradually sleep longer at night.

4 - 12 months

- At this stage, babies begin to follow sleep and feeding routines based on their environment. Night wakings and crying tend to decrease, and they spend more time in deep (quiet) sleep. Their sleep cycles also start to become more like an adult's, helping them sleep for longer stretches.

Safe Sleep Practices

- Safe sleeping practices also influences a baby's sleep. It helps babies sleep better and reduce risks like Sudden infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and suffocation.
- The Public Health Agency of Canada provides guidance on creating a safe sleep space, including using cribs, cradles, or bassinets, choosing a safe sleep surface, and the benefits of room sharing.
- For more information, feel free to view the brochure by scanning the QR code or clicking on the link.

Safe Sleep for Babies Brochure by Public Health Agency of Canada

References:
BC Children's Hospital (n.d.),City of Toronto (n.d.), Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (n.d.), Ruggieri, A. (2022), Ottawa Public Health (n.d.), Parlakian, R. (2016), Public health Agency of Canada (2021).

Community Resources for Infant Mental Health & Parent/Caregiver Support

Here are some community resources for Infant mental health and parent/caregiver support:

- Abiona Centre for Infant & Early Mental Health - Maternal Infant Mental Health (MIMH)
- Regent Park Community Health Centre - Child, Youth and Family Support Programs
- Strides Toronto - Infant Mental Health Program
- Yorktown Family Services - Child & Youth Mental Health Services
- Connex Ontario - Mental Health help line
- Sickkids Centre for Community Mental Health

