

A guide to *Changing Sleep Associations*



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Nature gave us many helpful ways to soothe our babies to sleep, particularly rocking and feeding. But what do you do when you are ready to put your child to sleep in a different way?

This guide will teach you how to change sleep associations that are no longer working for you and replace them with ones you prefer. The information included will be helpful for parents who are currently using a variety of methods to put their child to sleep: rocking, strolling, driving, bouncing, feeding etc.



Introduction

It is most common for babies to fall asleep with some kind of movement or feeding. This is completely normal and incredibly beneficial. Rocking is great for babies' physical and emotional development, helps them build an attachment bond with their caregiver, and is soothing and calming¹. Feeding is important for infant growth, helps baby build their immunity, develops their circadian rhythm, and is sleep-inducing^{2 3}.



For most families however, there comes a time when they no longer can or wish to put their baby to sleep in these ways. Perhaps your baby is getting too heavy, you want help from someone else to put baby down, or for whatever other reason, it has become unsustainable. It is perfectly reasonable to want to change the way your baby goes to sleep when it is no longer working for your family. Now you are left to wonder: **When I'm ready, how do I make a change?**

We all have routines, items, or actions that we associate with falling asleep. These are called sleep associations and *they are a good thing*. Reliable sleep associations tell our brain when it is time to sleep and make it easier to fall asleep when those cues are given. There is an old saying in neuroscience, *"neurons that fire together wire together"*. This means the more you engage in a repeated activity, the stronger that neural circuit becomes, making it an easier pathway for your brain to use in the future. Therefore, the more often your baby falls asleep in a certain way, the stronger those circuits become. Their brain will come to associate a particular routine, item, or action with sleep; that means falling asleep will be faster and easier when using that sleep association. Hooray! **Does this mean you can't change a sleep association?** Of course not! The brain is very plastic, meaning it is always learning new things and making new neural connections.

When you want to change your child's current sleep association, you need to help their brain make a new neural connection or sleep association. You will need to expose them to it repeatedly so their neural pathway becomes well-travelled and, over time, it will become easy for their brain to recognize the new signal for sleep.

Step 1: Introduce New Sleep Associations

Begin by introducing other ways to fall asleep. Sometimes families run into difficulties changing a sleep association because they only have one main way of putting their child to sleep that works. The first step is to introduce new sleep associations and layer them on top of the existing one that works well.

Here are a few sleep associations you could consider layering in:

- White noise or music
- Humming or singing to baby
- Stroking your child's head, body, or limbs
- Patting your baby
- Hand massage: gently squeezing your child's limbs with your hand(s)
- Introducing a pacifier
- Introducing a lovey (if your child is at least 1 year old)
- Baby meditation: naming and gently touching your child's various body parts from head to toe
- Rocking in a chair instead of standing
- Gently rocking your baby's body with your hands while they are laying on their bed.

For verbal children:

- Retelling the events of the day
- Breathing exercises: have your child mimic your deep, slow breathing.
- Gently drawing pictures on their back using your finger or nail.



Of course, you can be creative and come up with your own!

Choose one or two new sleep associations you'd like to add into your current routine. Continue to put your child to sleep with their favourite sleep association but add in the new one(s).

Examples:

If your child is currently rocked to sleep standing up, you might consider adding some calming music and rocking sitting down.

- If your child is currently rocked sitting down, you might consider adding humming or singing and giving a hand massage.
- If your child is currently fed to sleep, you might consider adding a pacifier and rocking sitting down.
- If your child is currently falling asleep in the stroller, you might consider adding a lovey and a baby meditation.

Step 2: Ensure Repeated Exposure

Remember your first goal is to build a new neural pathway or sleep association. You are introducing a new tool that will help your child fall asleep. Keep doing it alongside the other sleep association. Be patient because repetition is key. The more often this new sleep association is practiced, the stronger the neural connection will become.

Step 3: Reduce Old Sleep Association

Now that your baby has gotten used to 1 or 2 new sleep associations, you can begin reducing the old sleep association you wish to replace. Do this slowly and over time for best results. Follow your baby's cues, as you know them best. Depending on the child, some families will be able to change a sleep association in a week, but for others it may feel like a gentler fit to do it over several weeks (or even months).

Examples:

- If your child is currently rocked to sleep standing up, you might have the calming music playing and take pauses to rock sitting down. If your child fusses, you can get back up to rock standing for a bit and then sit down again. You would continue to lengthen the amount of time sitting until you are no longer standing anymore.
- If your child is currently rocked sitting down, you might be humming or singing and slow the rocking from time to time to do some hand massage. You would continue to lengthen the amount of time spent massaging until you are no longer rocking at all.
- If your child is currently fed to sleep, you might give a short feed, followed by the pacifier, all while rocking sitting down. You would continue to lengthen the amount of time spent with the pacifier until you are no longer feeding before sleep. *You will likely want to offer a feed earlier in the bedtime routine.* (Note: this is not weaning,



this is simply moving feeding to a different part of the bedtime routine. This can provide some freedom to breastfeeding moms by having someone else help put baby down if feeding is moved to an earlier time in the bedtime routine.)

- If your child is currently falling asleep in the stroller, you might have the lovey alongside your baby and stop moving periodically to do a baby meditation. You would continue to lengthen the amount of time spent doing baby meditation until you are no longer strolling.

Important Things To Note:

I recommend not only introducing different ways of going to sleep, but also going to sleep with different people. Introducing another caregiver or two will allow your child to get used to the way someone else puts them to sleep. You might be surprised at the way in which your baby will go to sleep with someone else; it might be totally different from how they go to sleep with you! That is a good thing. It means your baby can be flexible, and you can get more help and rest.

Please note that feeding and rocking to sleep are extremely important and beneficial in the early months. This guide is not intended to diminish the importance of these developmental supports and sleep associations. It is also not intended to promote early weaning or night weaning. (Breastfeeding is encouraged as long as is mutually desired and night weaning is not recommended before 1 year of age.) This guide is simply for parents with older babies who would like to change the way their baby goes to sleep or are ready to move feeding earlier in the bedtime routine to give some freedom to a breastfeeding mom who would like help with bedtime. Please contact me when you are considering weaning your child.

Remember that your child will always have a favourite way to fall asleep. You will want to use that particular sleep association on days when they are fussier and are having a harder time falling asleep.

This guide may make it sound like changing a sleep association is a simple process. I recognize that this process may be extremely difficult for some families.



If you would like support in changing your child's sleep associations, I would be happy to help you! 💖

Please contact me at intouchsleep@gmail.com or [@intouchsleepeducation](#) on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook!](#)

References

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