

# Nature Sleep

by Anitra Carr

**We used to have a dear old neighbour (over 80 years of age) who once told me that in her day all babies used to have their naps outside - if it was cold they would be rugged up nice and warmly and they apparently used to sleep just fine. I was thrilled to hear this as my two daughters have always slept outside.**

In our society today many babies are put to sleep by being placed (whilst still awake) in a cot in a quiet room by themselves with the door shut to keep out any noises of daily life which may 'disturb' them. As a result, many babies spend tens of minutes (some even hours) crying themselves to sleep. This is because being in a quiet, non-moving environment by themselves is the exact opposite of what babies expect or need (the feeling of being abandoned is the worst possible experience for a helpless baby). Babies have come from an environment (the womb) which was a totally sensual experience - constant motion and noise and touch/contact with the mother.

I am one of the growing number of parents who do not believe in letting their babies cry themselves to sleep, day or night. How I do this is every morning and every afternoon I take my 14 month old daughter for a walk in her stroller (as I used to do for her older sister). We walk regardless of the weather - if it is sunny we have a shade cover and if it is raining (or snowing!) we have a storm cover and she is wrapped up snugly. As we walk, she looks at all the sights (we live in a quiet part of town near a river with lovely big willow trees) and points out everything that catches her attention, particularly flowers, cats, dogs, ducks and other birds, even if she only hears them. She knows baby sign language for all these flora and fauna so can easily communicate to me what she wants to draw my attention to.

Eventually, after half an hour or an hour of this totally sensorial experience (visual, auidial and tactile - she usually holds onto a small bunch of hand picked flowers), she quietly and peacefully falls asleep and I park her on our balcony under a tree. As she sleeps she breathes fresh air and hears the sounds of birds chattering, the wind blowing through the trees, rain drops, dogs barking, and she easily sleeps through man made sounds such as passing cars and lawnmowers etc. Most important of all she knows that she is not alone.

She sleeps well, usually for about an hour and a half, whereas I hear of many other babies who are put in cots who will only sleep for 30 minutes at a time. This is enough to drive any parent to distraction as it is hardly enough time to get anything constructive done. A friend of mine once told me that her second child was a terrible sleeper and she was at the end of her tether one hot summers day when fortunately her older midwife arrived. The midwife swaddled the baby in muslin, bumped him down the stairs in the pram, parked him in the shade under a tree and he apparently slept for hours - more than he had ever done so previously.

Many people find cots a convenience as they can simply 'plonk' their baby in it, shut the door so they can't hear the baby crying, and walk away to do whatever they choose. I read somewhere that many native women find it hard to believe that their Western counterparts put their babies to sleep in 'cages'. Another friend of mine who cosleeps told me that their cot is purely for decorative purposes and to keep the extended family happy. Needless to say, we didn't even buy a cot for our second daughter (our first daughter would wake five times a night in her cot and sleep through the night in our bed, so no prizes for guessing which option we went for!).

At night time my husband and I take turns lying with our daughter in our bed while she goes to sleep (she is old enough now that she no longer needs to be breastfed to sleep). As a result my husband and I can spend up to three hours each day being with her while she goes to sleep, which sounds like a lot of time. However, having an older child who sleeps very well in her own room has

shown us that putting the extra effort into your child when they are young pays off in the long run (I have heard of many children who still have sleep difficulties even when they are much older). Besides, being second-time parents we know that babies grow up so fast and, as such, her current developmental stage will pass as quickly as ever. However, don't get me wrong - I am looking forward to when she does eventually go to sleep by herself in her own room!

P.S. Not long after writing this piece my darling little girl moved on to one nap a day in a bed, which just goes to show how fleeting and precious each phase is with our little ones.

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