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Parents' actions can affect child's bedtime behaviour

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How parents deal with a baby who has trouble getting to sleep and staying in dreamland can affect the child's bedtime behaviour into the preschool years at least, a Canadian study suggests.

In a study of 987 Quebec children followed from age five months until six years old, researchers at the Universite de Montreal found that babies with sleep problems -- including difficulty getting to sleep, awakening in the night and getting less than 10 hours shut-eye a night -- were more likely to continue having poor sleep behaviour later in childhood.

But the study, published yesterday in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, found that certain ways that parents coped with a sleep-disturbed child could help ease or perpetuate the problem.

Co-author Dr. Tore Nielsen, director of the Dream and Nightmare Laboratory at Hopital du Sacre-Coeur de Montreal, said soothing a baby with the breast, the bottle or food when he or she awakens in the night may be OK in the early months of life, but can perpetuate bad dreams once the child reaches 29 to 41 months.

"If the parents were still clinging to this habit that the parents brought with them from when the child was much younger -- you know, giving the child a bottle or giving the child something to suck on or chew on -- but doing this still at 40 months, the child is much more likely to have nightmares later at four years old," he said.

Parents need to wean themselves of that habit and teach children to "self-soothe" so they fall asleep by themselves after awakening, Nielsen said Monday from Montreal. The same is true at bedtime: "You have to put them to bed awake and let them fall asleep on their own. This is common, common counsel now for parents."

But when a child awakens frightened by a bad dream, Nielsen advises parents to do the opposite and provide comfort.

"Maybe what's at play here is the child needs a stronger sense of attachment," he said.

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