

The Seven-Ten-Two Sleep Schedule

Gently Guiding Your Newborn into a Great Sleep Schedule

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As a postpartum doula, I am hired to help families with the care of their newborn babies. I provide instruction, care and support, but one of the most valuable things I offer new parents is a method for gently guiding baby into a great sleep schedule. After working with more than sixty families, I have created a fantastic formula; I call it, “The Seven-Ten-Two Sleep Schedule” – to bed at 7:00 p.m., eat at 10:00 p.m., and eat at 2:00 a.m. It is important to note that The Seven-Ten-Two Sleep Schedule should be started only after breastfeeding is well established.

I support Attachment Parenting (AP) and value the benefits it offers families who use this method of parenting. However, I also recognize and understand that not all aspects of AP are easy to integrate into every family structure. In America, it is not uncommon for both parents to work; often this is not a choice, rather it is a necessity to make ends meet. Additionally, there are a variety of other family structures, including single parent and blended family households. Thankfully, an increasing number of companies are supporting new moms (and dads) beyond the standard 6-week maternity leave. As well, many states offer programs that require employers to allow new parents more time before returning to work after the birth of a baby. Despite the length of maternity (or paternity) leave, most parents must return to work, getting up bright and early to face the day, regardless of whether or not baby is sleeping through the night (or even close). A good night’s sleep is a must for any parent who has to juggle a full-time job with parenting, as a mid-day nap is not an option.

I have a few suggestions that will help you get started in the right direction. Swaddling is the first key to guiding your newborn into a great sleep schedule. Your baby must be swaddled snugly and with her arms down at her side. Before your baby is born, I suggest watching, “The Happiest Baby on the Block,” by Dr. Harvey Karp (DVD available at www.thehappiestbaby.com). Dr. Karp’s swaddling technique is excellent, easy to follow and is far more effective than the style of swaddling most often used in hospitals. (Note: the hospital wrap works well at first, but baby quickly learns to wiggle her way out of it, making it ineffective). Next, your baby should eat every three hours from sun up to sun down. It is important to remember that babies love consistency and repetition; following a schedule as precisely as possible will work wonders towards developing good sleeping habits. Finally, I suggest using The Seven-Ten-Two Sleep Schedule. After sundown, I use this technique to make the nighttime routine easy, but you can adjust these times according to your lifestyle and the individual needs of your baby.

Seven: Develop a bedtime routine with the goal to have your baby down by 7:00 p.m. I suggest starting with a bath between 5:00 and 5:30 p.m., followed by a feeding at about 6:00 p.m. By 7:00 p.m., your baby should be ready for bed and you can place her wherever she will be sleeping for the night. Once a consistent bedtime routine is

established, bath-time will quickly become a cue to baby that bedtime is soon to follow. As your baby gets older, you will add components and make changes to the bedtime routine, but you can maintain its consistent nature.

Sometimes, parents intentionally or inadvertently put baby on the same sleep schedule as their own. I caution against doing this as it can result in unnecessary challenges. Parents who do this may find themselves with a two year old who stays up late, but continues to wake at an early hour. This child will be sleep deprived and behavioral issues will erupt as a result. It is unfair to label a child as difficult, when she is not getting an appropriate amount of sleep. Remember, even though *you* may not be ready for bed, your baby needs about twelve hours of nighttime sleep – make sure she gets it!

An added benefit of having your baby to bed by 7:00 p.m. is the “alone” time you and your partner will have to nurture your relationship. If you go to bed at 10:00 p.m., for example, you and your spouse will have three hours of precious “alone” time together. Whether you use this time for a quiet dinner in your own dining room or for curling up on the couch to watch a good movie, it is important to spend at least a large portion of this time with each other.

Ten: Plan to feed your baby again at 10:00 p.m. I use 10:00 p.m. as a guideline, but you can feed baby between 9:30 and 10:00 p.m., or an adjusted time that works best for you. It is not uncommon for baby to sleep through the ten-o-clock hour if left alone, but consider the fact that babies generally have only one “long” stretch of sleep. The purpose of the 10:00 p.m. feeding is to align this single “stretch” with your own hours of sleep. To do this, gently wake baby just before you are ready to go to bed. Feed her quietly with minimum light and noise; I refer to this as “twilight feeding.” During a twilight feeding, your baby is likely to keep her eyes closed; she is just awake enough to eat. Regardless of where baby sleeps, feed her the way you normally do, but be extra gentle with your technique. After eating, baby will fall right back to sleep with little or no effort. Twilight feeding is especially easy for co-sleepers who breastfeed, but it can also be easily mastered by parents who use a crib and/or bottle-feed.

Extending the time between nighttime feedings is perfectly fine as long as breastfeeding is well established and baby is not exceeding every three hours during the day.

Two: Enjoy a nice block of sleep and plan to feed baby again at approximately 2:00 a.m. I use 2:00 a.m. because four hours is generally the length of time a newborn will sleep after her 10:00 p.m. feeding. As baby grows, she will have the ability to consume more milk per feeding, and as a result, will sleep longer between feedings.

The only constants you need to maintain in the beginning are the 7:00 p.m. bedtime and the 10:00 p.m. feeding. If baby does not wake at 2:00 a.m., allow her (and you) more sleep and feed her once she wakes on her own; she may sleep as late as 5:00 or 6:00 a.m.

Once your baby is consistently sleeping until 5:00 or 6:00 a.m., your next goal is to drop the 10:00 p.m. feeding. If your baby is especially difficult to wake at this hour, this is an indication that she is ready (or nearing ready) to drop this feeding.

Once this feeding has been dropped, understand that baby is likely to start waking up earlier even if she was previously sleeping until 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. For instance, baby may have been sleeping from 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. (skipping the 2:00 a.m. feeding). After dropping the 10:00 p.m. feeding, she may sleep from 7:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. It may take some time for baby to “stretch” these hours later into the morning, but before you know it, you will have a well-rested baby who is sleeping from 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. Additionally, every evening, you and your partner will have some well-deserved quiet time, without baby.

Some babies will adapt to The Seven-Ten-Two Sleep Schedule in a matter of a few weeks, while others may take as long as six months. Don't expect your baby to sleep through the night until she is at least fourteen pounds and remember that every baby is different. It is important to note that even after baby has developed a consistent sleeping routine, she may begin to wake frequently at night when she is teething, experiencing a growth spurt or approaching a new skill (sitting up, crawling, walking, etc.). This is especially true of a sensitive and/or high need baby. Be patient during these times and remind yourself that baby is waking for a reason. It is true that as a child gets older, she may resist going to sleep (out of defiance), but with patience and a little common sense, you will be able to tell the difference between a *toddler/child* who is resisting bedtime and a *baby/toddler* who wants to sleep but for some reason (teething, approaching a new skill, etc.) is experiencing difficulty doing so. Give her extra TLC (and Tylenol for teething) during these times. She will fall right back into her “great” sleep schedule once the “challenge” has passed. Some babies will be unaffected by these challenges and will continue to sleep through the night with little or no disruption.

A consistent bedtime routine and sleep schedule will follow your baby throughout her childhood and also makes for easier transition when introducing a new baby to the family. Remember – good sleep starts now!