

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Go Ahead – Sleep With Your Infants \*

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Robert Wright, author of *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*, opposes forcing very young infants to sleep in cribs separated from their mothers. This ritual is known as "**Ferberizing**" a child, after Richard Ferber, an expert in infant sleep.

Ferber views this separation of the baby from its parents' bed as a harmless, initial step to make the child more self-reliant. Parents should ignore the infant crying in a crib. If crying continues for 20-30 minutes, parents may pat the baby – but not pick up the baby. Of course, when the parent leaves, the crying will start again. After enduring this for a week to a month, the baby may sleep through the night.

Wright admits a personal bias. He and his wife are "*failed Ferberizers*." Their first daughter cried for 45 minutes. They gave up and let her sleep in their bed. Three years later, they didn't even set up the crib for their second daughter. They found that they liked sleeping with their baby.

His second bias involves the evolutionary theories of **Charles Darwin**. Wright sees infants sleeping with parents for the first few years as natural for our species. That seemed to be the norm in hunter-gatherer societies. Mothers would nurse their children to sleep and nurse on demand throughout the night. It's not much of an effort to nurse the child in the same bed. The mother often does this reflexively, without waking. If she does wake, she soon fades back to sleep with the child. The father is seldom disturbed. (Wright says the feeding process never wakes him.)

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### Parents do not need to feel guilty about letting their infants sleep with them.

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Wright argues that Ferberization is unnatural. He believes that parents should feel free to practice either method. In Wright's terms, "*Live and let live*."

In contrast, Ferber believes children *need* to sleep in a room alone. This makes parents like the Wrights seem negligent. According to Ferber –

*"Even if you and your child seem happy about his sharing your bed at night, and even if he seems to sleep well there, in the long run this habit will probably not be good for either of you."*

Ferber says that sleeping alone lets your child "*see himself as an independent individual*." Wright doesn't understand how being imprisoned behind the bars of a crib and being relatively unable to influence its environment will give the child a robust sense of autonomy. (With the 40 hours a week that many children now spend in day care, do they need more autonomy training?)

Comparing Ferberized to non-Ferberized children will be fruitless. Any differences found are likely to be due to broadly different approaches in children-rearing practices – or different cultural backgrounds. In other words, we cannot control these other variables to estimate the worth of Ferberizing.

Without supportive data, Ferber makes guesses about what is happening in the child's mind. According to Ferber, if the infant is allowed to sleep between you and your spouse, "*in a sense separating the two of you, he may feel too powerful and become worried*." To Wright, the infants just seem to be "*cozy*."

Ferber says, if a child fears sleeping alone, letting him sleep with the parents will not solve the problem. "*There must be a reason why he is so fearful.*" In contrast, Wright reasons that the child's brain was designed by natural selection. For thousands of years, children slept with their mothers. If babies awoke to find their mothers gone, this may have signaled that something terrible had happened. Perhaps their mother had been dragged away and eaten by a beast. Wright suggests that the baby's screaming may be a way to attract relatives who can give help.



Lack of a "*family bed*" may also deprive infants of mothers' breast milk during the night. The milk not only provides nutrients, but it gives hormones for development and antibodies to protect against diseases. These nutrients are received during the day, so this gap may not be harmful. In addition, failing to nurse at night can cause painful breast engorgement.

Evidence suggests that nighttime feeding is natural, but Ferber disagrees. If your three-month-old baby still wakes to be fed, Ferber insists, "*She is developing a sleeping problem.*"

To Wright, Ferberism is part of an oppressive, patriarchal social structure. For centuries, male physicians – with little idea of what motherhood is like – have pushed women into doing unnatural things. They said infants shouldn't be fed more than

once every four hours. Now they admit they are wrong. They used to push bottle-feeding, but now they have changed. For a while, physicians told pregnant women to keep weight gains at a minimum. They reversed themselves again. However, they are still telling mothers to avoid nighttime feedings to infants over a few months old.

Wright is not saying that parents *must* allow their infants to sleep with them. However, there are enough advantages of the "*family bed*," so he wants parents to feel free to consider that option. So if you want, go ahead – sleep with your infants.

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\* Adapted from Robert Wright's "Go ahead... sleep with your children," [\*The APA Monitor\*](#), June, 1997, page 16.