- Infants / Sleep

Views Culture

Time for bed

Can anthropology and biology help babies sleep better? A new book has some fascinating insights but is somewhat impractical, says **Penny Sarchet**



WESTEND61 GMBH/ALAMY

Book
How Babies Sleep
Helen Ball
Cornerstone Press (UK); Balance (US)

LIKE many mothers of young children, I have spent a lot of nighttime hours reading about baby sleep on the internet. I'm fluent in the lexicon – from wake windows to split nights – and the frustratingly impossible exhortation to "put your baby down drowsy but awake".

I approach all these concepts as I would in my day job – looking for evidence, or at least some semblance of scientific plausibility. Both can be hard to come by.

So it was with excitement that I picked up *How Babies Sleep: A factful guide to the first 365 days and nights* by anthropologist Helen Ball, hoping to finally get the level of scientific detail I had been looking for. I came in with three questions: Is it true that babies' sleep cycles are around 40 minutes? Why are overtired babies so difficult to get to sleep? And what causes the sudden, disruptive "sleep regression" parents often see at around 4 months?

The book partially delivered. Throughout, Ball details many changes in sleep that occur around the 3-to-4-month mark, yet she is keen to dismiss the notion of sleep regressions. A chapter on sleep biology, however, did confirm that 3-to-6-month-old babies have sleep cycles of 45 to 60 minutes in length, vindicating advice I had read suggesting that if a baby wakes around 40 minutes into a nap, they may just be slipping into their next cycle and won't necessarily be ready to get up.

As for overtiredness, Ball explains how a baby who won't go to sleep can be one of two things – either not tired enough (in which case you would be better off giving up and taking them on a walk), or tired enough but not sufficiently relaxed to give in to sleep. That certainly explains why "overtired" babies need more comforting before they nod off – but while Ball dispatches with the common idea that "sleep breeds sleep", I was still left wondering whether babies who have had enough naps in the day might be better able to wind down in the evening. It seems logical, but throughout the book, Ball suggests quite a relaxed approach when it comes to daytime sleep – "allowing babies to nap on the go as and when they need to".

"Ball suggests abandoning crib-based naps, but I found they were essential to keep up with chores"

In fact, Ball suggests that abandoning crib-based naps can be "incredibly liberating", whereas I found they were essential for keeping up with all the cooking, cleaning and laundry. Her solution to this conundrum is to draft in friends and family – alloparents, as they're known in anthropology – to help. This has a long evolutionary history, but I'm not sure how it can work if your friends and family aren't nearby, or have other things to do.

For a book intending to guide parents through the first year of sleep, I was surprised at how many pages were given over to the benefits of co-sleeping. Ball has done much research into how families bed share in countries like the UK, where the practice isn't as prevalent as it is in most of the world.

The conclusions of her and others' research are, from an evolutionary perspective, fascinating. For example, mothers and babies who share a bed sleep in very different ways from those who sleep apart, particularly those who breastfeed. There's a syncing of arousals and a lightness of sleep that may, possibly, be beneficial for babies' brain development, and that gives mothers a "heightened awareness of their presence".

Does napping more during the day lead to a better night's sleep for babies?

That doesn't sound particularly restful for mum, though. And the book's heavy emphasis on co-sleeping is unfortunate for other reasons, too. While it is becoming clearer how to safely bed share, there are many factors, detailed in the book, that can make the practice less safe and rule out this option for your family.

I have no problem accepting Ball's assertions that co-sleeping is globally and historically the more normal thing to do, but I had hoped for much more guidance on alternative ways of sleeping. Instead, much of the useful information is squeezed into 17 pages of frequently asked questions at the end of the book, with not enough space for the scientific detail I was hoping for.

Frustratingly, Ball concludes: "how your baby sleeps over the course of their first year can happen in whatever ways work for you and your baby". I just wish there was more evidence to help us find these ways. ▮

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