



## *What's the Deal with 9 months?*

Nine months seems to be a common age for parents to seek our help with their little one. It seems to be a peak time for another sleep *progression* and wakeful nights, as well as more challenging behaviour. For some families, this is the first time they have been really troubled with difficult nights and they are at a loss as to how to tackle the problem. I feel there are several things that happens in a baby's life at around 9 months that all contribute to it being a challenging time for parents. Firstly, you are not alone if this is sounding like you!

I think the main culprit is a sudden decline in total 24 hour sleep requirement. As our babies get older, they need less and less sleep, but when a sudden decline happens it can often really rock the boat. If our babies are not tired enough coming into the evening, then they will wake more often over night and/or take a lot more effort to get back to sleep. If you are struggling with a wakeful 9 month old, I would first focus on chipping back on sleep during your awake hours, to help them take more sleep at night. Although this sounds easy, it can be difficult to balance the reduced total 24 hour sleep need, with the quick-rising sleep pressure. The reason our babies cannot go all day without a day time nap, is due to the quick-rising sleep pressure. Adults have a much slower-rising sleep pressure (or feeling of tiredness) and that's why we only need one sleep in 24 hours. At nine months, it can be hard to limit day time sleep as any big changes will mean they risk falling asleep at danger-o'clock (anytime after 4:30pm). Even tiny cat naps at this hour can significantly reduce sleep pressure and result in a very late bed time or a very wakeful night. So the solution needs to be small changes. Take away 15 mins of day sleep at a time. The bang-for-buck will usually be trying to extend out the last "awake-widow" before bed. Your options are not letting them sleep past a certain time in the afternoon, or pushing bedtime back. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, our older babies just have to take more day time sleep than we would like (due to the influence of this quick-rising sleep pressure), and our nights will continue to be wakeful. Trusting that this will pass may help get you through. It will pass when their total 24 hr sleep needs shrink further and/or when their sleep pressure rises more slowly and they can be jollied along with different activities.

The other developmental milestone that occurs around 9 months and really interferes with the parents' nights is "object permanence". Before babies develop this, they believe that if they can't see something, then it is not there. This is the premise of the game peek-a-boo. Around 9 months they begin to learn that something may still be close, even if they can't see it. An example is a ball rolling out of the room. At nine months they now realise that the ball is just around the corner, not gone completely.

This has significant impact on parents as this is peak separation-anxiety time. When a baby wakes at night and can't see their parents, they now know that the parents are "just around the corner" and will often want reassurance that they are nearby. Babies that used to settle easily overnight, or even 'self settle'\* may no longer be able to do this. In fact, many babies will not be satisfied by simply seeing or briefly touching their parents again - they will need the security of being plastered next to



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them for most of the night. For many families that did not intend on co-sleeping, 9 months will be when it starts. This too shall pass. And I firmly believe it will pass most quickly if we respond to their needs and acknowledge that 9 months is a time when they need lots of security and closeness. They won't learn emotional independence by being separated from their parents if they are not ready to do this.

Most parents find their 9 month old quite "parentally intensive". Separation anxiety often leads to 'koala babies', where they suddenly don't want to be separated from their primary care giver. Baby wearing may be the only option - which at 9 months is often hard on the back. They need a lot more stimulation and change of environment to be settled. They get bored quickly and are often frustrated by their lack of movement. They would love to go and choose the toy they want to play with, but are often stuck if not competent at crawling. They are still very dependent on their parents, but they strive for independence. This will often lead to tears of frustration from both parent and baby. In the first 6 months, when babies often have longer day naps, parents can enjoy getting things done when their baby slept. By 9 months, day sleeps may be short or unpredictable and so parents need to adapt. Embracing that entertaining their older baby will take up the vast majority of their time and dropping expectations of getting anything else done, may be the only way to survive. If this is not possible - look at your village and see if anyone can come and give you a hand either playing with the baby (unless separation anxiety is high) or doing some washing and cooking. We were not meant to raise babies on our own.

For many families, 9 months is all about rolling with the punches. Strategies we suggest involve adding lots of fun activity to your baby's day that is mostly out of the house, and trying to chip back on day time sleep if the nights are not manageable. Embrace their need to be close to you - fighting it will not work. And, like all things with babies, this too shall pass.

\* I do not believe that the term self-settling should ever be applied to babies or children. Self-settling implies a much higher-order level of thinking and emotional awareness that babies and children are simply not capable of having. Many adults do not even know how to self-soothe or self-settle and often need external inputs (ie other people) to help them. What we are really talking about with infants is the ability to roll over and go back to sleep after a sleep cycle has ended. This is purely a reflection on the level of sleep-pressure and how 'awake' a baby becomes over night. If a baby is not sleepy enough, they will always seek parental input to help them go back to sleep, be it a breast feed, a bottle, a cuddle or a pat. This is very normal and developmentally appropriate.