MoxieTopic:
Problem Solving Procedure

I can't tell you the number of emails I've received from stressed-out, sleep-deprived parents who think their kid has one big problem, but who really has a bunch of small problems all ganging up on each other. It's likely that anything major that you're experiencing is actually a bunch of smaller problems all cycling on each other, too.

When you're in the middle of a whole mess of problems, it can be very hard to figure out which way to go to start unraveling the whole thing. Especially since a lot of those problems interact with each other and reinforce each other. Your normal life and work problem-solving skills don't seem to apply to baby and child situations, and you can feel just completely overwhelmed and running away to join the circus doesn't sound like such a bad idea.

And then there are the experts... Don't you sometimes just want someone else to tell you what to do? You know that if you knew what to do first you could just do it. But at the same time, you do know the situation and your child better than anyone else. Especially someone who wrote a book but has never met your child. So a one-size-fits-all plan isn't going to work, either.

Here's my offering for you: A choose-your-own-adventure problem-solving procedure. I'll lay out three different ways of going about unraveling your big knot of kid issues, and then you pick the one that appeals to you most on a gut level. It's choice at the top level, and then heads-down-and-just-do-it on the ground level.

When you're ready to attack the problems, and you have a plan you're happy with, you can do it. Let's go!

Approach #1: Go for the low-hanging fruit. Often, there are one or two problems that you can fix easily. They won't affect the core problem, so it almost seems not worth it to do anything about them. But if you can change some things easily to eliminate one or two easy problems, then those problems are gone with little energy investment on your part. (And we all know energy is the scarcest resource of all at a certain point in parenting.)

Plus, getting a win or two right away inspires you to keep going solving problems. You gain more energy, and can attack the next easiest problem next. Once that's fixed, you attack the next one, and so on, until you get to the most difficult problem. But at that

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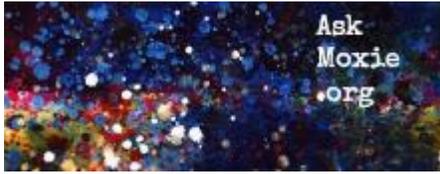
point, presumably, you have more energy and space to deal with that big problem, because you don't have all the little problems bothering you and affecting your sleep.

As an example, let's say that you're convinced that your baby "can't sleep" and it feels completely screwed up and insurmountable. But when you list out all the reasons you think this, you see that it's actually several different smaller problems: your bedtime routine takes so long that your baby is overtired and crying by the time you get her to bed, she needs to hold on to your hair to fall asleep, she wakes up repeatedly in the middle of the night when her pacifier falls out, and she wakes up so early that she naps too early in the morning and that puts her whole nap schedule off for the day so she's sleeping more during the day than at night, and you're exhausted. And because you're so exhausted all the time you don't feel like you're making rational decisions about her sleep in the moment.

You can see how that would feel like one enormous problem, but is actually a bunch of small problems that are just cycling on each other. The late, crying bedtime (because of the long routine) is the low-hanging fruit, because it's the easiest to change.

If you use the low-hanging fruit approach, you'll work on the bedtime first. Think about what the actual problem is: your baby is breaking down because the routine is so long and by the time it's actually time for bed she's overtired. So there are two different ways to go after this. One is to keep the routine the same but start it earlier. The other is to shorten the routine by cutting out some steps.

Does it matter which way you try first? No. Pick one, and try it for four days. (By day four you'll start to feel a little bit of success if this plan is going to work, although it won't be completely fixed yet.) If it works, you're golden--keep going. If it doesn't work, try the other one. Once you've gotten an earlier bedtime so your baby isn't overtired and crying, you'll have gained a little breathing room and be able to regroup and figure out the next thing to work on. Wait a few days to see if the better bedtime makes one of the other problems seem easier to fix, then go after that one.

Pros of going after the low-hanging fruit first: Easy fast win gives you more energy to keep going. Fewer problems faster.

Cons: It takes longer overall to eliminate all the problems, and gets progressively more difficult as you go on to more difficult problems. You end up doing more problem-solving overall by working on each problem.
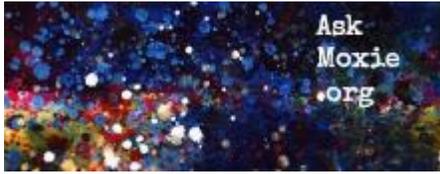
Approach #2: Take out the leader first. This approach is based on the approach used in movies about rival gangs, in which killing the leader of the opposition makes all of the leader's henchmen scatter to the four winds, so the good guys win. If you can figure out if one of the problems is the foundation of all (or most of) the other problems, then if you can fix that central problem, all the other related problems should fix themselves. The problem with this is that it often takes a lot of energy and time to attack that central problem. If you can muster up that energy and hang in there to solve that problem, though, you end up saving time as most of the other dependent problems resolve themselves.

Let's try this with the same situation we outlined before: your bedtime routine takes so long that your baby is overtired and crying by the time you get her to bed, she needs to hold on to your hair to fall asleep, she wakes up repeatedly in the middle of the night when her pacifier falls out, and she wakes up so early that she naps too early in the morning and that puts her whole nap schedule off for the day so she's sleeping more during the day than at night, and you're exhausted. And because you're so exhausted all the time you don't feel like you're making rational decisions about her sleep in the moment.

In this situation the leader, or the problem that underpins all the other problems, is the fact that you're so tired because the baby keeps waking up all night because of the pacifier. Once you can get the baby waking up less often not only will you have more sleep so you can deal better, but your baby will probably sleep longer in the morning which will adjust the naps, and flip the ration of nighttime sleep to daytime sleep in the proper direction. In other words, fixing that nighttime sleep cycle problem will likely fix many (if not all) the other problems.

You may need to do some prep work before you start working on the pacifier issue by getting yourself more sleep for a few nights in a row so you have the energy to deal with it. You could do this by taking shifts with another adult (so you each get at least four hours of uninterrupted sleep in a row), going someplace else for a few nights to sleep alone, hiring or asking someone else to come and help at night so you can sleep, or some other creative idea that gets you sleep.

Once you're ready to deal with the pacifier issue, make your plan and then execute it. The first three days will probably be tough (which is why you need the base of sleep before you start), but by day four you should start to feel it working a little. Keep going. Once you've solved the pacifier problem, maintain for a few days before you assess the new situation and figure out what's fixed itself and what you might need to work on next.
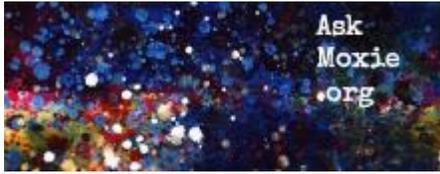
Pros to attacking the leader of the Jets (assuming you're a Shark): Immense feeling of satisfaction when you take out the central problem plaguing you almost makes up for having the problem in the first place. You spend less time on problem-solving total, because the dependent problems resolve themselves.

Cons: You might not be able to hold it together enough to even consider going after the central problem, depending on how bad that problem is in the first place. Then you're caught in a trap.

Approach #3: Hybrid model. In this approach, you go after one or two of the low-hanging fruit problems first to get yourself some ego-boosting quick wins, and to create just enough ease to regroup and attack the central problem. If it works, it really works. If it doesn't work, you might stall out before you hit the central problem, but at least you've gotten rid of one or two small ones.

Same problem as before: your bedtime routine takes so long that your baby is overtired and crying by the time you get her to bed, she needs to hold on to your hair to fall asleep, she wakes up repeatedly in the middle of the night when her pacifier falls out, and she wakes up so early that she naps too early in the morning and that puts her whole nap schedule off for the day so she's sleeping more during the day than at night, and you're exhausted. And because you're so exhausted all the time you don't feel like you're making rational decisions about her sleep in the moment.

In this model you go after the low-hanging fruit--the too-late bedtime--first. Once you've knocked that out, you're boosted by that success to go after the pacifier problem. (If you felt like you could do it, you might also go after the hair-holding problem, too, since that's also low-hanging fruit.) You'll still need to get a base of a few nights' decent sleep to be able to go after the pacifier, but since bedtimes aren't a crying mess anymore you know you can do it, and the sun going down doesn't inspire so much dread.

Pros to the hybrid model: Quick wins to power you through having to figure out the central problem. The low-hanging fruit problems may not be related to the central problem, so once you take out the central problem and have already fixed the low-hanging fruit problems, you're done.

Cons: If you stall out, you might not get to the central problem.
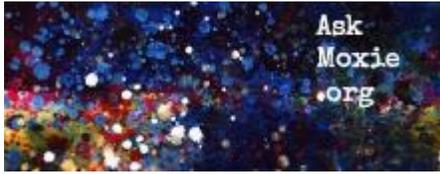
To choose which approach to use for whatever you're dealing with right now, go with the one that attracts you most. Or repels you the least. Seriously, there's no right way here. You just need to pick a plan and then go with it. So pay attention to how you're feeling about this whole big situation, and about your ability to problem-solve and get to the bottom of it all. You have permission not to fix it fast, and not to fix it perfectly. You have permission to just take a little minute to feel sorry for yourself. (Parenting is hard.)

Then, pull up your socks and decide if one of these approaches sounds like a way that makes sense, and make your plan based on that approach. Don't forget to include a reality check as part of your plan. The reality check consists of writing down, in detail, what the whole ugly problem set consists of right now. Then, every three days as you're working on the problems, write down, in detail, what the whole ugly problem set consists of that day. By writing it all down you'll be able to look back and see exactly what's changed, and by only writing it down every three days you give time for whatever changes you're working on to have an effect before you assess anything about them.

Write it down, decide what you're going to work on first, decide how you're going to work on it, and then start. In three days write it down again and assess. Is what you started working? It doesn't have to have fixed the problem already, but you can probably tell if things are moving in the right direction. If they are, keep going. If not, see if you can figure out why and what you should do differently, then do that. In three days write it down and assess again. Once you've fixed the first problem, move on to the next problem and keep going.

Before you know it, you'll have worked out this set of problems, just in time for your child to change and move into a different set of issues. It's always something. And you'll never hit perfection, but you can get really, really good at problem-solving with your kid over 18+ years. Find a process that works for you, and you'll be able to find a starting point for every problem.

Courage.