

MoxieTopic:

Tension Increaseers and Tension Releaseers

So much of the literature out there on how your baby sleeps puts all the responsibility and agency on you, the parent, to Do The Right Thing and create this perfect little sleeping machine. If your baby doesn't sleep the way whatever book you're reading sets out as the ideal way, it's on your shoulders. It's easy to feel guilty or like a failure if your child doesn't conform to the method in the book.

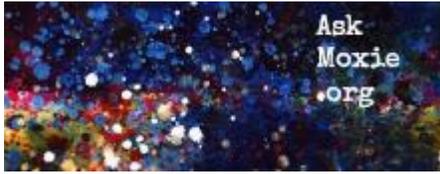
What's wrong with that is that babies are just little humans, and humans have variability. Anyone who's carried two or more children knows that they already have different patterns of movement even while they're still in utero. Which means that babies aren't blank slates that you can program to sleep in a certain way. Instead, they're individual people with individual differences in the ways they process and respond to stimuli. So you can influence how they sleep, but not control it completely. And you'll have better luck influencing it if you understand more about your specific little person and how they respond to stimuli.

One decision that incites a lot of controversy is whether or not to allow your child to cry to fall asleep. People on both sides of the argument get very concerned about the moral implications of crying or not crying. I'll argue that this decision makes no sense as a moral issue, and instead is a logistical issue. Parents should make the decision about crying based on how their child reacts to the crying. There are (at least) two ways to interact with and react to crying, and knowing which way your child reacts will tell you if crying will help or hurt your child in falling asleep.

Some children become more and more upset the more they cry--the crying increases the tension they feel in their bodies. I call these kids (including my older son and me) Tension Increaseers. Other children seem to tap off tension by crying, so crying helps them relax. I call these kids (including my younger son) Tension Releaseers.

Tension Increaseers

Tension Increaseers seem to need to apprentice to learn to fall asleep. They will go to sleep relatively easily by nursing or being rocked, and may rely on a pacifier to fall asleep. As toddlers they may need someone to be in the room with them while they fall asleep, but they usually fall asleep with someone there. In the middle of the night they can be comforted back to sleep, but they almost always need some kind of touch.



When tension increasers cry, however, it doesn't make them feel better. There's no such thing as "having a good cry to get it out" for tension increasers. Instead, crying makes them feel even more upset, even more tense. A tension increaser baby who is left to cry for a few minutes will then need a much longer time to calm down and stop crying, because the act of crying initially was so upsetting that they get into a loop.

(I am a tension increaser, and even as an adult if I start crying too hard I'll get into a loop in which I'm crying because I'm upset about crying.)

Tension increasers seem to express and release emotions through physical contact or activity. This is why tension increaser babies fall asleep more easily by being rocked or held, and as kids and adults they are comforted more by hugs or by physical exercise than by crying. Bearing this in mind, if you can set up a bedtime routine (and naptime routine) that involves physical touch, your tension increaser will fall asleep more easily.

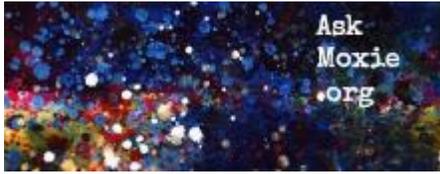
Earlier I talked about tension increasers apprenticing to learn to fall asleep. This is the best description I can come up with for how the process works. Since they don't have the mechanism of shutting themselves down through crying, they need to learn to fall asleep on their own. And since physical comfort is a part of their falling to sleep, parents have to have the expectation that it will take more than a few months (and for some kids it really does take years) to be able to recreate in themselves the feelings of physical relaxation and comfort that they get from close physical contact. Once they can recreate the physical soothing on their own, they can fall asleep on their own without unusual problems.

Tension Releasers

aka "Having a Good Cry"

Tension releasers need to tap off tension or negative energy by ranting. In babies, that manifests itself as needing to cry to fall asleep. "Need" may be a strong word, as plenty of tension releaser babies have fallen asleep without incident in a stroller or car or even accidentally while lying in a crib. But often the regular routine of falling asleep involves some crying or fussing.

The crying seems to serve two functions: first, it releases tension in the baby, much like some adults "have a good cry" when they're feeling bad to get out the tension and be able to relax. Second, it creates a kind of white noise in the baby's head that blocks out other stimuli. Tension releaser babies will cry for short periods--anywhere from a few minutes



to 15 or 20 minutes--before going to sleep because the crying releases their tension and they'll be relaxed enough to fall asleep.

Tension releasers are usually ok with being touched physically while they fall asleep, but they don't need it to fall asleep, and some of them distinctly don't want to be touched while they fall asleep. Tension releasers may also be prone to tantrums that flare up quickly, burn themselves out, and then disappear, leaving the child in a much better mood. This seems to be the same mechanism of tapping off tension and other high emotion by crying (or ranting and raving) and then letting it burn off.

As toddlers, tension releasers will still often cry to fall asleep, but as they get older they may become irritable and pick fights or throw tantrums at bedtime instead of outright crying. Bear in mind that as tension releaser babies get older, the function of crying will be taken over by throwing tantrums, because it provides that same tension release function.

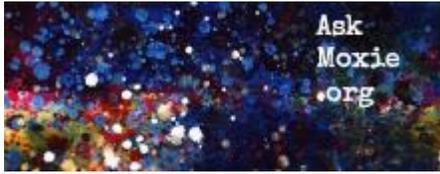
Determining Whether Your Child Is One or The Other or a Mix

To find out whether your child is a tension increaser or tension releaser, experiment a little.

What happens when you rock or feed your baby to sleep? A tension increaser will often fall asleep from the physical comforting. A true tension releaser might enjoy the rocking, but may not fall asleep from it, and may even start crying or fussing while it's happening.

What happens if you leave your baby alone to cry for three minutes? A true tension increaser will cry more and harder, so the crying at the end of the three minutes will be much more intense than the crying at the beginning of the three minutes will be. A true tension releaser will start winding down, so the crying at the end of the three minutes will be weaker and not as heated as the crying at the beginning.

If it's not obvious how your baby reacts to crying, try out rocking and crying each a few times to see if you can get a read on your baby. It's not unusual for a baby to be one at night and the other for naps, or one way up through a developmental spurt or regression and then switch to another. People and babies can have combinations of both aspects. So you could end up figuring out that at certain times of day or even in certain rooms your baby needs to fall asleep one way, but in a different situation your baby needs to fall asleep another way. The important thing is to pay attention as much as you can so



you can base what you're doing on what makes things easier for YOUR baby, not following some external theory that assumes all babies are the same.

The Physical Connection

Tension increasers tend to be more internal about their emotions. Note that this doesn't have anything to do with being an extrovert or an introvert. It just means that tension increasers don't necessarily tell anyone when they're upset or angry or sad. If they do, releasing the emotions can get very out of control and messy, which is painful for tension increasers, so they don't allow their emotions to get out of control at the surface. In contrast, tension releasers release their emotions by expressing them, and aren't afraid of being out of control.

So tension releasers will cry or throw a tantrum and use that to get out emotions and tension. Tension increasers will keep it all bottled up and then need some kind of physical activity or stimulus to get it out because the physical activity provides a safe structure for the emotion to go into without flying out of control. Hugs are one way to release emotions and tension, but physical activity such as running and swimming are other excellent ways to release emotions and tension for tension increasers.

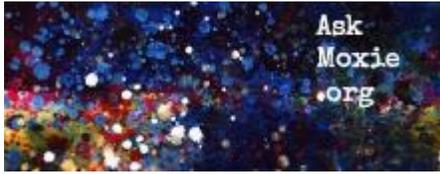
This means that if you can figure out if your baby is primarily a tension increaser or tension releaser, you'll also have more insight into how to help them manage emotions and bad feelings for the rest of their lives. Allow tension releasers to talk and rant and cry about their feelings. Encourage tension increasers to spend a lot of time hugging and exercising so their feelings can work out that way.

So What Do I Do With This Information?

After all of the sleuthing and reflection it takes to tell if your child is a tension increaser or a tension releaser, knowing how to proceed once you know is the easy-ish part:

1. If your child is a tension increaser in any situation (nighttime sleep, daytime sleep, while going through a regression), don't do any crying-based method of falling asleep. It'll backfire and everyone will end up really unhappy.

Because tension increasers tend to process physically, rocking, nursing, using a pacifier, co-sleeping or other physical methods of soothing to sleep are going to give you more



success. While this can seem kind of open-ended and not specific enough, the up side is that if one way of soothing to sleep doesn't work, there are plenty of other options to try.

In general, tension increasers need physical activity or contact to help process their negative emotions. And the reason they don't have their emotions on the surface isn't that they don't feel emotions, but that it is too painful to have those emotions on the surface. Physical activity gives them a non-painful release mechanism.

2. If your child is a tension releaser, help your child release the tension by crying to create the white noise and release energy to fall asleep. Some children start crying toward the end of their bedtime routine because it feels like "it's time" to start shutting down and they're triggered by the routine to start crying. Others will be so tired and frustrated that they start to cry out of feeling bad, but then the crying makes them feel better and they fall asleep from being relaxed.

Crying is a direct path to falling asleep for strong tension releasers, so it almost always works. The only hitch is that if a child is crying and then something happens (an interruption or just a fluke) so they don't fall asleep as the natural outcome of the crying, there aren't a bunch of other things you can try, so you may need to wait awhile to "reset" and then start again.

Understanding whether your child is a tension increaser or releaser will not only help you make decisions about getting your child to sleep, but it will also help you understand how your child processes and expresses emotions in general. It also helps you shift your focus away from an external standard of what you should be doing to the relationship with your child, in which you're free to do what's best for your actual child.

Courage.