

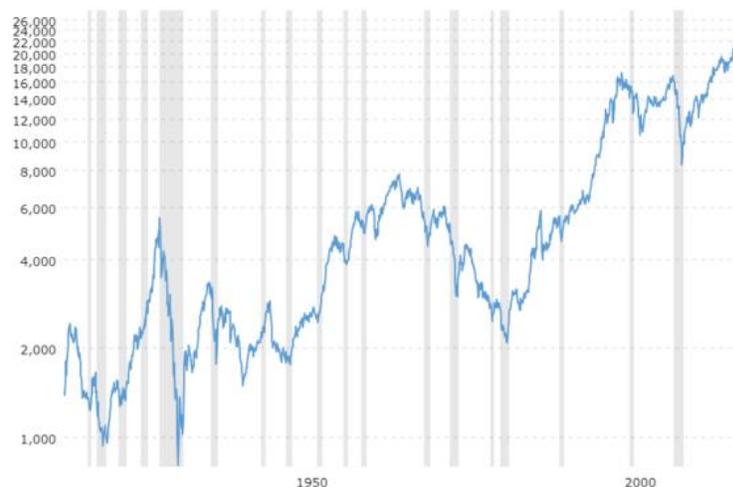
What Sleep Development Really Looks Like

One of the biggest myths that I have to regularly bust is that sleep development is linear. People think that once their child has reached a certain milestone (e.g., sleeping a 3-hour stretch, falling asleep unassisted) that there is no turning back, that barring illness or something dramatic, that skill is learned, can be checked off, and all is good.

This isn't how it works.

Normal sleep development is a fluid process filled with ups and downs. I have been known to use various analogies, such as ocean waves that build up, peak, and then crash again, or the stock market with all sorts of ups and downs around a *general* consolidation of sleep. (Please note the use of 'consolidation' over 'improvement'. I don't like improvement because it implies there is something deficient in our children's sleep and there isn't. Often the way they sleep is actually optimal for their development and safety.)

Just look at this image of the the Dow Jones Industrial Average over a 100-year timespan:



You can see that there are ups, downs, and sometimes downs that make you wonder if it'll ever climb up again. Sound familiar?

The question most families have at this point is *Why???* How can children "lose" skills that they had?

The issue isn't that they have lost skills, but rather how we all actually gain skills. Think about the first time your child learns to walk. It's tentative and slow, but they've got it. Now you bring them to the forest with hills and rocks and suddenly, they're falling all over the place. Has your child forgotten to walk? No! Clearly the *level* of skill your child had wasn't ready for this harder terrain. Similarly, even us

adults sometimes feel wobbly when we're trying to walk on a boat that's rocking back and forth and we've had years of experience. It's all about how our current skill level matches what kind of environment we're in.

This brings me to the next point: There is always something going on for our kids in the first few years. If you think about the type of development that needs to take place for our kids, frankly it's a miracle they sleep at all. Just a few of the things they will face:

- They will approximately double their size in the first year (some more)
- They will have an entire set of teeth (with two sets of molars) come through
- They will learn to crawl and walk and run, using muscles that hadn't been used before and resulting in seeing the world in an entirely new way
- They will learn to speak, changing the way they communicate with the world and others
- They will develop a sense of identity ("me") and then learn they are actually separate beings from those they are closest to
- They will learn others have minds different from their own and have to try and navigate that
- They will experience emotions that are uncontrollable for them and won't know what to do

All these things will impact sleep. Why? Because sleep is dependent upon things like physical pain or discomfort (when we hurt, we don't sleep well), psychological security (if we are afraid, we don't sleep well), and the ability to turn our minds down to relax (if our brains are whizzing with new information, we don't sleep well).

So throughout the first three years, our kids go up and down. They develop a skill with respect to sleep and then that skill is tested through all these other events. Then they master those events, things calm for a bit so those sleep skills can resume, and then another one hits.

THIS is normal sleep development. There's nothing wrong with it and your children are not suffering because they aren't sleeping 10 hours straight. Hopefully knowing this can help you ease some pressure off yourself about your child's sleep habits, especially if you are facing constant criticism from others around you. If someone looks baffled that your child is waking, remind them what your child is doing and ask them how they would sleep if they were taking all that on. If they couldn't handle it, why should your baby?

Tracy Cassels, PhD is the Director of Evolutionary Parenting, a science-based, attachment-oriented resource for families on a variety of parenting issues. In addition to her online resources, she offers one-on-one support to families around the world and is regularly asked to speak on a variety of issues from sleep to tantrums at conferences and in the media. She lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two children.