

November 1999

Big Apple Parent

Commentary

Confessions of a Ferberizer

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Guilty. We did it. We lay in bed one night and let our eight-month-old son cry. We had no plans to implement the Ferber Method. In fact my husband and I both strongly believed that it was cruel to leave an infant sobbing in the dark. We plead temporary insanity, or maybe self-defense.

Everyone has heard about the Ferber Method. You teach your baby to fall asleep on his own by making incrementally spaced trips in to comfort him as he cries. You do not pick him up or touch him, but you let him know you are there. It is a behavior modification program that teaches your child to comfort himself. I never dreamed I would experience it first-hand.

We certainly did not have the patience to rock our second child each night as we foolishly did with our now seven-year-old daughter. Bedtime was an undertaking with her, more complicated and delicate than stealing state secrets. After singing song after song, we would gently carry her to the crib, rocking, swaying and humming while checking for eyelid flutters. We would lower her inch by inch until her body touched the mattress. Very slowly, we would withdraw first one hand, then the other, leaving just fingertips to maintain contact. Then carefully the fingers could be retracted as we glided ever so quietly backwards out of the room. At any step, the eyes might snap open to expose our treachery and then the whole process would begin again.

Years later, we still yawn at the thought of that procedure. We agreed that our second child was simply going to learn to go to sleep!

Fat chance. Our little boy required rocking, singing and swaying from the beginning. Gradually he became a tyrant, waking us up 10 times a night. The final straw was a vacation with my husband's family when we took turns rocking and singing in our tiny room, knowing the whole family was awakened by each frequent, demanding shriek of outrage.

We came home from the trip certain that things would improve once we were all sleeping in our own beds. The first night home, at 1 am after the third wake up call, in our sleep-starved delirium we gave Dr. Ferber a chance. It took about an hour of screaming and carefully timed trips back and forth to the crib, but we all did eventually sleep that night. After two more nights of less and less frequent awakenings, we were a Ferber family.

Sounds pretty simple, right? But when you lay awake at 3 am and feel your heart, broken by the multiple stab wound wails that you just know you should be responding to, it seems simply inhumane. When you walk into that room and a face, red from screaming and coated with tears and mucus, confronts you accusingly, you simply want to gather your child into your arms and calm the hyperventilation with hugs and soothing clucks.

Even when the Ferber Method works, you can't help but believe that if you were a better parent you would be willing to rock and sing all night, or to make room in your bed for an extra little body. We beat ourselves up, even after we discovered that the method was successful. Nothing about it seemed right — except for the fact that it worked.

Soon we could just put our son in bed and he would drift off on his own. But I missed those rocking chair times. I missed that soft little head in the crook of my arm and the quiet breathing against my skin. Now our little Ferber success story goes to the bottom of the stairs each night and asks to go to bed. If you try to rock him or cuddle him at bedtime, he squirms away. Even in the middle of the night, with a terrible cold, he refuses to be rocked or sung to. We taught him to comfort himself, not knowing we were taking away our own ability to do so for him.

The new rocking chair we bought when we learned I was pregnant has not received the hours of use we anticipated. I do not miss the hour-long bedtime persuasion ritual our daughter required and am relieved to be able to get the kids in bed and know they will sleep. My son and I still rock in the rocking chair, but only to read or watch TV together. I still sing songs to him, but only when we are playing, bathing or swinging.

Sleep is a wonderful gift, yet sometimes I think I would trade it for a few moments with a sweet bundle in the dark of the night. ✕