



Help! This House is Full of Larks! Dealing with Kids Who Wake Up Early

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To me, one of the most challenging experiences in transitioning to parenthood is the complete and total lack of sleep. I have always loved my sleep, and was blessed in my early 20's to be a fantastic sleeper. I worked 13-hour night shifts in the sleep lab, watching people sleep while I drank coffee and tried my best to concentrate. I can remember driving home at 9 AM, chewing gum to fight the fatigue and wearing dark sunglasses to avoid extra sun stimulation. I would CRASH, and then have to wake in 6 hours to start all over again. I worked three nights in a row, and then would be off for four days- it was a pretty awesome schedule for a single girl. Of course, I spent an inordinate amount of my time off trying to "catch up" from the workweek.

I started to struggle during my first pregnancy- I had never slept well during the day, and pregnancy stole my pitiful daytime sleep. I would fight to fall asleep, wake every hour or so, and then struggle through the night. My days off were filled with some rest time, but not as much in the past, and most of it was spent creating a divot in the couch, rather than catching up on sleep. My night work schedule also destroyed my ability to sleep well on my nights off. I would lay in bed, feeling the baby shift around, and trying to remain still while my husband slept soundly. The final insult was the onset of snoring in my last month (happens in 60-70% of pregnant women), and "we " agreed that I was best off sleeping on our couch. MISERABLE. I was so excited for the baby to come so that I could go back to normal sleep- because that is what happens with a newborn, right?

I will be honest; I have studied sleep and sleep-related behavior for my entire professional career. My first job in sleep, working in a SIDS research lab, meant that I had strong opinions about infant sleep habits long before I had kids. When we had co-sleeping pairs in the sleep lab, mom and baby tended to wake each other all night long. Since my job was to capture the infant's sleep pattern, this would be very stressful for me, because I was constantly hoping we could sustain periods of sleep between the two. This was my experience in the SIDS lab, but does not mean that this is a definitive scientific conclusion (for an argument on the other side, you could read McKenna & McDade's 2005 article in *Paediatric Respiratory Reviews*, "Why babies should never sleep alone"). I was certain that there would be no co-sleeping, and I would follow some very specific steps to introducing our new baby to our home. We, like all new parents, were afraid to leave him alone for any length of time, so we had him sleep in a bassinet in our room for the first few weeks, and then moved him to his crib in his own room. We used my knowledge of circadian entrainment and behavioral adaptation to encourage sleeping at night, and he was sleeping through the night at 6 weeks. Baby number two was a

10-pounder at birth, which gave us a metabolic advantage toward sleeping, so she slept through the night at 4 weeks. Baby number three was there in the middle at five weeks. These kids were great sleepers.

There is one catch, they all take after my husband and are larks in nature. I could relish sleeping in on weekends, but my children never make it even 15 minutes beyond their normal wake time. The latest that any of them have slept has been 8 AM, and this was a fluke experience after an extended vacation. When our oldest was 7, I was waking at 4:45 AM to go to the gym, and did not realize that I was waking him when I left the house. He would wake up, turn on our big screen TV, and sit watching TV until his dad came downstairs at 7. He started to demonstrate some of the classic signs of childhood depression: crying uncontrollably, angry outbursts, diminished interest in activities. I started to worry about how we would move forward with treatment, when I discovered his early wake pattern- he was losing 2 hours of sleep each night. Being a lark, his brain is very sensitive to early light cues, and the TV had entrained him to wake at 4:45, even on the days that I skipped my trips to the gym. We set a passcode to lock the TV, and he started to return to his old sleep pattern, and we had our kid back. Raising larks means that I have to be very sensitive to AM activity, light exposure, and food, or else they will naturally drift to early awakenings. Our son understands the rules, and knows to stay in the dark until his alarm wakes him, and tends to sleep to the appropriate time. Our two younger ones know to check in with us before they turn on lights, which means that we occasionally have early-morning room invaders. We by-pass the tendency to drift into co-sleeping by sending them back to bed unless it is within 30 minutes of desired wake time, then we will cuddle in the dark but not go back to sleep. Lights come on, activity starts, and food is given only after desired time of day, because we know these guys like to drift early. Hopefully, some day, I may relish another late morning.