Normal Infant Sleep: Night Nursing's Importance

My child only goes to sleep nursing

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Most parents in the early months know how quickly an infant can go to sleep while nursing. In fact, nursing often is what sends our little ones to sleep. Although many people do not think twice about these behaviors when their infants are still quite tiny, they start to worry about it as the child ages. It doesn't help that falling to sleep while breastfeeding is listed as one of the sleep disorders by sleep researchers (Melzer & Mindell, 2006) and that often family and friends will tell you that you're doing your child harm and that he or she will never learn to fall asleep on his or her own. Many "sleep experts" will recommend not letting your infant fall asleep on your breast for fear of creating this "bad habit" (Meltzer & Mindell, 2006), instead recommending that you rouse your little one before putting him or her down.

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As long as breastfeeding your child 'till they are sleeping and placing them down while sleeping is not a problem for you as a parent, you need not worry about it for your child. How can we say this? First, a child who is tired enough will fall asleep whether or not you are breastfeeding. Although falling asleep at the breast may remain a preferred way to fall asleep for a child (full of the closeness and intimacy that is so necessary for bonding), it will not be a necessary step. As children age, they will fall asleep in various places and positions. Young infants should not be forced to fall asleep without comfort; they may need to nurse to feel relaxed and safe enough to enter sleep. Another factor to remember is that all children eventually wean. Nursing and cuddling to sleep offers comfort for your child, a closeness that is associated with positive developmental outcomes. Children will seek this closeness as a natural part of development. This is not a bad thing, it is simply offering your child the closeness that is a natural part of growth and parenting.

If still uncertain, be assured that breastfeeding is a natural way to help children sleep and provide important support for their growth. Parents should know that breastmilk in the evening contains more tryptophan (a sleep-inducing amino acid). Tryptophan is a precursor to serotonin, a vital hormone for brain function and development. In early life,
tryptophan ingestion leads to more serotonin receptor development (Hibberd, Brooke, Carter, Haug, & Harzer, 1981). Nighttime breastmilk also has amino acids that promote serotonin synthesis (Delgado, 2006; Goldman, 1983; Lien, 2003). Serotonin makes the brain work better, keeps one in a good mood, and helps with sleep-wake cycles (Somer, 2009). So it may be especially important for children to have evening or night breastmilk because it has tryptophan in it, for reasons beyond getting them to sleep.

The other concern that is brought up is that infants and children who fall asleep at the breast (or even in-arms) often wake looking for the same environment in which they first feel asleep (Anders, Halpern, & Hua, 1992). This can lead to crying upon waking when they find themselves in a different environment, such as a crib. [For parents who cuddle and breastfeed, parents have reported decreased signaling as infants learn to seek mother’s breast and latch themselves on to breastfeed when waking at night. Though arousals continue to be greater in bedsharing dyads (Mosko, Richard, & McKenna, 1997), this natural interaction provides a soothing and simple way to care for infants as they wake.] In these cases, when the children are developmentally ready, putting them down nearly asleep and letting them finish the process on their own may help reduce wakings that result in signaling for the parent. However, one should not expect an infant (or toddler) to sleep through the night as they have myriad needs that require parental responses, even during the night.
References


