

The Anthropology of sharing a bed with your baby.

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By Penny Johnston (Penny is the presenter of Babytalk)



It could be a mark of modern parenting that we know more about what we 'shouldn't do' with babies as opposed to what we should do.. we are warned not to trust our instincts when statistics and research recommend something else. So with our modern lifestyle which precludes many 'traditional practices', weight of public opinion on the 'right' way to raise a baby and public health advocates giving us really well meaning advice, what do you do when you find yourself 'breaking some baby rules' especially when it comes to sleeping with them in your bed? You get some advice from the Anthropology department and Professor Helen Ball from Durham University!

Professor Helen Ball is professor of Anthropology at Durham University in the United Kingdom. She is also director of the Parent Infant Sleep Lab at Durham, where she and her colleagues study the sleep of newborns and their parents. It's research that was originally established to study primates but has been developed to provide parents and their babies with recommendations for sleep that go against some of the current sleep guidelines. As you would imagine primates sleep with their newborns, as do many traditional cultures around the world. However it's not something that health professionals would in Australia (and in fact a recent Victorian Coroners Report recommended very strongly against the activity known as 'co-sleeping' with young babies).

At the Durham University Parent-Infant Sleep Lab research focus has covered infant and child sleep ecology, sleep development, sleep safety, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), parental sleep, night-time infant care, feeding practices, twin infant sleep behaviour and physiology, postnatal ward environments and maternal-infant sleep, cross cultural infant care practices, and the evaluation of interventions affecting parental and infant sleep.

So what does the research show? Are we genetically programmed to be able to safely sleep with our baby? The act of caring for a very new baby means many times a night when a

parent (lets face it usually the mother and always in the case of breast feeding!) getting up to feed the baby. Would our ancestors be driving themselves crazy by crashing around in the dark to another room or would they have kept their babies conveniently close by?

Professor Ball explains that many parents do find they will be "accidentally" bed sharing with their breast fed baby because it's easier to care for the baby in bed during the intensive night feeding phase. Parents are not however admitting it publicly. "Parents are frightened to talk to health professionals in some instances and this is one of the things that shuts down the transmission of information on how to do it safely."

Many of us will admit they slept with the baby in the bed at least once and I am hoping all of us know what makes it safe.

- + No drugs, alcohol or cigarettes to be consumed (or have been consumed) by anyone in the bed.

- + Do not swaddle the baby, it must be free to move so it doesn't get stuck anywhere in the bed.

- + The bed must be a proper firm mattress, not a couch or a folding bed.

- + If your baby was small at birth or born early (before 37 weeks) bed sharing is not recommended.

Professor Ball believes that many of the current SIDS deaths in the UK were due to reasons other than bed sharing and that many of the 'old statistics' were part of much larger infant mortality figures that were common 50 to 100 years ago.

Professor Ball's research has contributed to the NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) guidelines for Great Britain that recommends that health professionals discuss safe sleeping practices and do not dismiss out of hand the option of bed sharing.