

Is your baby getting enough sleep?

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By Eveline Gan

Insufficient rest can cause babies to be hyperactive, cranky or obese later in life

BEDTIME with my energetic one-year-old daughter, Jubilee, is always a nightmare — she fusses, cries and whines for a good two hours before falling asleep.

And her brief naps — lasting at most 30 minutes — are hardly lengthy enough for me to even get started on the laundry.

But apparently, Jubilee isn't the only baby in Singapore who doesn't seem to sleep much.

A recent study was done on more than 25,000 babies — from newborns to those aged three — across 17 countries. Of these, 1,001 were from Singapore. The results showed that Singapore babies get less sleep — about 40 minutes less — than babies in other Asian and Caucasian countries.

Singapore babies also have a later bedtime (9.38pm on average) and rise earlier (6am).

According to paediatricians Today spoke to, the hectic working lifestyles of Singapore parents could be the reason for this phenomenon.

“It seems that parents who work late are making a difference. Whether the mother works also influences the baby's sleep habits,” said Dr Jodi Mindell, a paediatrics professor from the School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. She headed the study by the Asia Pacific Paediatric Sleep Alliance (APPSA) and Johnson & Johnson.

Dr Chng Seo Yi, a consultant at National University Hospital's University Children's Medical Institute, said that most local mums work full-time. So, it is not unusual for their babies to sleep later and rise earlier to accommodate mums' working schedules.

“If the mother comes home at around 8pm, which is fairly common, she may keep the children up a little later so that they can spend quality time together after,” she said.

According to Dr Chng, another reason why babies here experience less sleep may be because they are “woken up prematurely from their sleep” in the morning, so parents can take them to daycare. Most daycare and infant care centres here operate from about 7am.

Nighttime arousals are another sleep problem most babies face, said Dr Mindell.

“It is normal for babies to wake up three to six times a night, for about 15 to 60 seconds. But their sleep is going to be affected if they're awake for 10 to 20 minutes each time,” she said.

Ultimately, “both quantity and quality” sleep is important for growing babies, said Dr Chng.

“When adolescents and adults don't get enough sleep, they slow down or become sleepy the next day.

“But babies and toddlers behave differently. They become irritable, cranky and may even become hyperactive,” said Dr Chng.

Insufficient sleep in babies has also been linked to obesity later in life.

To get babies to sleep better, Dr Mindell recommended parents to establish a bedtime routine, which includes three to four “quiet activities” about 30 to 45 minutes before bedtime.

“It could be a bath, massage, followed by a bedtime story and then a cuddle. But parents must make sure the routine is the same every night and at around the same time, so that the biological clock is set to anticipate sleepiness at that time,” she added.