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## Calling the baby whisperers

**When baby starts screaming at 3 a.m., what's Mom to do? Many sleep-deprived new parents are turning to consultants for help. That training often starts with Mom and Dad.**

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Sleep consultant and "new parent mentor" Vonda Dennis' clients like to say that she carries magic pixie dust in her pockets. How else to explain a screaming baby so quickly settling to sleep in her arms?

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But Dennis says a lot of what she does to quiet a baby is simply common sense. "Most of what I tell my clients sounds really reasonable, and a lot of it is basic logic that parents have, but just aren't pulling from," she said.

In her postnatal mentoring sessions, Dennis focuses on "Believing in Yourself" and "Instinct Training" as well as sleep training and relaxation. The goal, she said, is "not so much training the babies, but training the parents."

Although all types of people seek out sleep consultants, Dennis' clients tend to be high-performing professionals, mostly in their late 30s and early 40s. "It's funny and cute at the same time," she said. "Most of them run companies or are heads of major corporations, but they cannot figure out how to get a little person to sleep."

Sleep consultants such as Dennis say that despite the recession, their business is booming. Jill Spivack, co-founder of Sleepy Planet, a sleep consultancy firm in Santa Monica, suggested that the poor economy might be fueling anxiety and stress in the home. That may be part of it, but most of the parents and sleep consultants I spoke with said the uptick has more to do with increasingly befuddled and over-educated parents drowning in information overload.

"My mother said, 'All we had was Dr. Spock; no wonder you are all confused,'" said Eileen Henry, a 48-year-old sleep consultant based in Colorado. "I also think we all cry uncle sooner."

It's hard to blame parents for not having faith in their intuition when they are constantly being exposed to new studies and conflicting information. For example, intuition might tell parents to put a baby to sleep on her stomach, but that position increases the chances of sudden infant death syndrome. Intuition might suggest asking one's own parents how they put babies to sleep, but the answer often is, "I let you cry," or "I can't remember; that was over 35 years ago." And at 3 in the morning, when parents are dragged awake by a screaming baby, intuition might just say to stick a breast in his or her mouth.

"Every six months, the winds of child-rearing philosophy change," said Brandi Rouse, a sleep consultant based in Atwater Village. "There is so much information out there that it keeps people from using their intuition. I tell parents all these things will

work; it's about figuring out what works for your family."

For parents who have lost their way, sleep consultants whose services generally run \$200 to \$800 function in the same way as business consultants. They serve as trusted and experienced third-party experts who take time to learn the specifics of a family's particular situation and then create a customized plan.

Many of the tips sound a lot like common sense: Don't walk a baby around a well-lighted house; try not to make eye contact at 3 in the morning; create a nighttime routine. But the key to their success is devising a plan that parents will stick with, and then holding their hand through the tough times.

"At least 50% of any case with sleep has to do with the parents' comfort level with staying consistent with the plan," Spivack said.

For those parents who can't stand to hear a baby cry, some consultants might recommend the "sleep shuffle," an elaborate system in which a parent spends a few nights sleeping on the floor next to the crib and then gradually moves farther away until he or she is sleeping in the hall outside the nursery door and eventually in his or her own bed.

For those who can handle some crying but are worried about emotionally scarring their infants if they abandon them in the crib, other consultants might suggest parents go into the baby's room to check on a child who is screaming not to pick the baby up, but to say something like, "Honey, I love you, but you need to learn to sleep on your own."

"I feel that babies are very similar, but I tailor the program for the parents," said Rouse.

Another important part of most sleep consultancies are the follow-up phone calls. Most consultants will, for a fee, make themselves available to clients for half an hour or an hour a day for two weeks. Part of this service is to help with troubleshooting, but most of it is to keep the parents on track.

For many parents, that hand-holding is the most valuable part of the service, even if it means they have to accept the fact that they need help with something that sounds so basic.

"Before I had kids, a friend of mine told me she was going to hire a sleep consultant and I thought, 'What's wrong with these people? You think it should come naturally,'" said Valeria Van Brummelen, who wound up hiring a sleep consultant herself when her daughter was 9 months old. "Maybe there's too much information out there, but I was very confused. I don't know why we need to pay for these things, but we did."

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