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Your mother-in-law was right: breastfed babies don't sleep through the night

A US study has revealed that babies sleep best when they're bottle-fed. Why is it taboo to tell the truth, asks Helen Rumbelow

There will come a long dark night in the soul of a breastfeeding mother when she feels as though she just can't get out of bed again to jab a boob in anyone's mouth.

At this point it is considered wise not to remind said breastfeeding woman of the advice of her mother-in-law — that the baby would sleep only if she gave it a damn bottle.

Perhaps this is why the news has been suppressed, whispered only in academic circles for fear of reprisal. This is what your health visitor, midwife, baby sleep book, the NHS and National Childbirth Trust won't tell you: your mother-in-law is right.

All that stuff about babies sleeping better with a bottle, all that stuff the experts insisted was an old wives' tale or the dark arts of the formula

companies: it may be true.

It pains me to say this, too: breastfeeding means your baby will not sleep as well at night; breastfeeding means your baby will wake up more. This evidence has been hushed far more effectively than a generation of nursing infants.

"That's because there is such a strong breastfeeding lobby," says Dieter Wolke, a professor of psychology at the University of Warwick and an expert on infant sleep habits.

"Yes, breast is best, but it is never good to lie to someone. If you breastfeed, at least in the first three or four months, your baby will tend to wake more frequently at night. But it is only in that period of life and breastfeeding has a lot of other benefits. Parents often have such sleep deprivation they give up breastfeeding anyway, but if you warned them, maybe



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they wouldn't. Often a problem is half-solved if you know what to expect."

To those without babies this may seem like small beans. But to those in those broken — no, shattered — nights, it feels like lifting the lid on a terrible taboo. It is also a story about our attitude to the truth, and how much truth the powers that be think the little people can handle and still make the right choices for themselves.

It came out in a recent study by Marsha Weinraub, professor of psychology at Temple University in America. She was able to track 1,200 babies from birth to the age of 3, interviewing parents at four intervals about how their baby had slept the previous week.

"With that many babies, following them for so long, we were going to look for patterns. That was really our goal and no study has done that before."

What they found was that most babies, about two-thirds, slept remarkably well by the age of six months, sleeping through nearly all nights of the week (for the purposes of sleep research, a baby sleeping "through the night" is not what parents wish for, it is classed as about six hours from 11pm).

But the other third was a different story. Their parents were hollow-eyed with exhaustion. They demanded attention in the small hours every night, often more than once a night.

"Their parents generally reported their sleep as a real problem."

The No 1 issue — no surprise to anyone who has found themselves at 2am, googling "nasal suction, baby,

head cold" — was that the baby was ill. But the next big thing was breastfeeding. The breastfed babies were more likely to wake at night. The other two lesser factors were whether a baby's temperament was classed as "irritable" by parents, and "maternal sensitivity", a psychological term for how responsive mothers are to children.

When Professor Weinraub checked other research she found that an

association between breastfeeding and more night wakings had been proven in many large-scale studies that question thousands of new parents. It's just the public that has yet to hear about it.

"Why is it that babies who are nursing wake more at night?" asks Weinraub.

"Is it that they are not getting enough nourishment? That's certainly what a lot of mothers think. But even when they are older, 15 or 21 months, when they are eating more food, they

continue to wake more. The fact is that wakening declines when breastfeeding does. There is something about nursing that will lead to awakenings. What we think is happening is that babies need to learn to self-soothe to go back to sleep. If nursing is used to help babies go back to sleep instead, that can mean those babies having difficulties learning to soothe themselves."

But isn't this very politically incorrect? "I presented this study to

some very strong breastfeeding advocates. They said, obviously, if you look at your data, night-waking is a positive thing, because it is correlated with more maternal sensitivity and more breastfeeding, which are both good. So waking at night is a sign of a healthy, hungry baby. I said, 'Ask a parent'."

So should parents who want their baby to sleep give up breastfeeding?

"No. But if you want your baby to sleep, don't rush in to breastfeed at night as soon as your baby wakes up, running counter to their ability to get back to sleep by themselves."

A number of less reliable small studies are also circulating, involving just a couple of dozen or a hundred or so families but it's the big landmark studies, such as Weinraub's and Wolke's that matter. And don't expect to hear a whisper of them from your midwife. I asked Wolke why, as a veteran milk machine, I was so surprised by this research. Yes, he said, there's a reason for that: healthcare professionals freaking out that if mothers find out, they will give up the boob. He encountered a lot of fear in the academic community when his study



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in 1998, involving nearly 6,000 infants, concluded that breastfeeding went along with more night waking. Now, he describes it as a “well-established finding” reproduced in many different countries.

“At the time, it was really hard to get it published. But, like we say in the paper, if there was more support for night waking, it might prevent early termination of breastfeeding.”

He argues that the research is good news for breastfeeders. The deeper you get into it, the more you see it is not actually the breastfeeding itself that’s at play, but the type of parenting that goes along with breastfeeding. On the whole this is a good type, but a type that needs to turn it off a little at night if they want more kip.

Wolke’s study looked at two groups of mothers, one in Germany, one in Finland. At five months, both groups showed that the breastfed babies woke more often than formula kids, three times more often in Germany, twice as often in Finland. Wolke thinks for the first few months the extra night feedings are probably necessary, as breastmilk is not the same consistency as formula milk and travels faster through the body. Quite possibly this is a factor in its healthiness.

But what happens next is crucial. Once a baby is weaned on to solids at six months, it is developmentally ready to sleep through the night. Yet in Wolke’s study, the German breastfeeders continued to have a much worse time at night. Meanwhile, the Finns managed to train their breastfed babies to sleep beautifully.

Why so? It turns out pretty much everyone breastfeeds in Finland. But in Germany, as, in Britain, Wolke points out, those still going at six months and beyond are the heroic minority.

“In a society where breastfeeding is not the norm, those mothers are a very self-selecting group, very child-orientated, who are also more likely to take the baby into bed, set fewer limits, feed them to sleep. In Finland, everyone is breastfeeding, so you’ve got everyone saying the breast is good, but a lot of people also

introducing limits on what the baby gets at night.”

In other words, the type of mother to breastfeed her child in the UK gets her heart broken every time her baby cries at night. She could get a better night’s sleep if she adopted a harder line; we’re not even talking the dreaded “cry it out”, just encouraging your child to sort themselves out a bit more.

Wolke thinks it is time that mothers got the truth. He understands the paranoia that it may wipe out the decades of breastfeeding campaigning overnight, but he disagrees. Being honest will help, he says, not hurt.

“We know that breastfeeding goes along with more night-wakings, it’s in the research. But the very, very strong breastfeeding lobby, well, we support that — breast is best. But parents aren’t stupid. If you tell them it’s hard work, but only for a short period, and the benefits are in the long run, well then they feel more prepared, less disappointed, more supported.”

Weinraub is the mother of two boys and Wolke the father of a girl and a boy. The children were all breastfed, though both second children were scrappy sleepers. Weinraub muddled through while Wolke experimented successfully with his own gentle sleep training. All four children are now young adults and sleeping just fine.



“**Babies need to learn to self-soothe to get back to sleep**”

