

WHY OUR HEALTH VISITORS ARE FAILING MOTHERS

We all know sleep is important and how bad we feel when we don't get enough, and that continued disrupted sleep can cause health problems, poor development psychically and mentally. But did you know that scientists today are still confused as to why we sleep? What is clear is that we have to sleep because it is essential to maintaining normal levels of cognitive skills such as speech, memory, innovative and flexible thinking. In other words, sleep plays a significant role in brain development. Sleep is a huge issue for many parents and they are just one group that purport greater indices of sleep disturbance when their children are between the ages of 0-8 years of age. Many mother turn to their health visitors for help, who in my belief are letting them down.

If mother don't get enough sleep or their sleep is continually broken they will suffer from Sleep deprivation. This will have a major impact on cognitive functioning but also on emotional and physical health not the optimal position to be in when caring for young children.

Sleep deprivation affects 40 % of the population; hence the reason professionals refer to sleep problems as "common". Does the fact that poor sleep is a common problem felt by most vulnerable members of our society namely children the elderly, the mentally ill and parents mean that it is not a "real" problem? It would seem so by the comments and inaction of most health care professionals.

Doctors are often perplexed by the sheer volume of women who visit their offices and by their inability to provide effective solutions to the mothers who request support for their child's sleep habits. What parents don't realise is that doctors are medically trained and are not psychologists; common sleep problems are more often than not related to behavioural matters and can be effectively manage by behavioural specialists. Doctors are therefore not qualified or interested in dealing with what they refer to as parenting issues when there are more serious illness and diseases out there.

So doctors shush and placate these desperate mothers by either, prescribing drugs and or referral to Health Visitors. Clearly not acknowledging the consequences of poor sleep and how this may impact negatively on the children and family health, both mentally and clinically. What these mother need is for health care professional to rule out sleep disorders first and then help them find the right support right? Wrong. They are sent to health visitors who themselves are limited in how to help sleep deprived children and their families.

Health visitors are letting mothers down by their inability to offer proper support and advice and sleep advice that does not involve elements of CC. Parents are often told, "If you don't use controlled crying then be prepare for little to no sleep". I write this with a heavy heart as I am aware that there are many highly qualified specialists nurses out there carrying out their job, in very difficult circumstances, under paid and under resourced, with heavy case loads. However, a fact is a fact and from the comments I have received from my clients they are fed up with Health Visitors only offering them controlled crying as a viable option, they are fed up with Health Visitors bullying them , telling them that if they don't do controlled crying then they have to put up and shut up. They are always asking me why they have to pay for an alternative view....and what about the mothers who can't afford it?

It's a crying shame, excuse the pun, that our Health Visitors are not trained in any other way, and as such they regurgitate outdated, controversial information, that most mothers don't want to hear let alone carryout with their precious little babies. It is about time that someone, did something, sorted this, mess out, offer parent's constructive support and reassured them, instead of making them feel less confident and inadequate as they already feel. Our Health Visitors need to be more sensitive to the needs and wishes of the mother, who don't want to let their babies cry it out. They need to, if they don't know what to suggest go back to their mangers, PCT's, and the government if necessary and gather up to date research, training to inform their practice, isn't this what best practice is all about. I say, stop minimising the importance of sleep and the effects of poor sleeping habits. Be proactive instead of reactionary, help parents by trusting and support their maternal instinct.

I have been studying sleep for over 10 years and run a sleep clinic in London, I am so outraged at the lack of support pregnant women and new mothers receive when it comes to sleep problems, I set up the association of sleep consultants and wrote a programme to train Health Visitors in our methods. Today I train child care professionals who want to become qualified sleep consultants, in my small way I am trying to bridge this enormous skills gap.

Written by Chireal Shallow March 2007