

OVERNIGHTS: The Difference Between Night and Day

By

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Daytime gives us sunlight

Daytime is familiar

Day time is for activity

Daytime is for learning

Daytime is for exploration

Daytime is for mastery

Daytime breeds confidence and security

Nighttime brings on darkness

Nighttime is strange

Nighttime is for comforting

Nighttime is for dreaming

Nighttime is for closeness

Nighttime is for fantasy

Nighttime may breed anxiety and fear

(Note: For the purpose of this article, I have used the term “mother” for the primary caregiver of the child, but it can refer to the father, grand parent or other primary caregiver with whom the child has a secure attachment.)

Most of us experience qualitative differences in our feeling and activity states during the daylight as compared with nighttime hours. Aloneness during the dark feels more stressful than it does in the morning or afternoon. Sounds, shadows, movements, or smells are easily ignored in the familiar comfort of daylight, while at night these may evoke fears, worries, and even terror. We often feel more pain and ill at night than during our waking hours.

With this in mind let us explore how infants and young children react when predictable patterns of nighttime routines are altered. Children are often distressed when they are required to spend the night and fall asleep in another bed, house, or city with a parent, grandparent or person who is not their primary caregiver. It is with their primary attachment figure that they are able to feel secure, comforted, and soothed so they can fall off to sleep, thus separating from their waking world. Even when traveling with their familiar parent, strange and new environments can prove stressful and upset the usual sleep patterns.

When parents separate or divorce both mother and father want time with their child. However, little consideration is given to the stress suffered by the child by altering nighttime routines and rituals. Most of these routines are associated with proximity to the mother who is usually the primary attachment figure, but it may be the father, grand parent, or nanny. The primary attachment figure may sing familiar songs or lullabies, whisper some familiar words, tell a story, or read a book. The child enjoys the unique voice and smell, a special way of rocking, holding or patting. The child may need to be nursing, sucking or cuddling a special stuffed animal or doll or blanket. All these behaviors create a relaxed, comforting atmosphere conducive to sleep.

Infants, toddlers and preschoolers up to the age of 5 often show extreme distress, anger, and fear when sleep routines are abruptly changed and they are separated from their primary caregiver with little or no preparation. The child feels enraged at both parents. Anger is expressed at the one who has taken him or her to a new situation and to the other parent for allowing it to happen. A nighttime with screaming is an ordeal for all, and often results in emotional consequences for the child.

Unfortunately, the effects of this sleeping disruption do not end when the child is back in a familiar environment. Often children display a heightened level of separation anxiety and will not let the mother out of

sight. Extreme clinging behavior may occur as trust in both parents is shaken. Increased irritability and regressed behavior is frequently noticed after a stressful overnight visitation.

In an attempt at being fair and even handed courts tend to divide time between parents with little understanding that nighttime separation from an attachment figure creates stress and is qualitatively very different from daytime separation. In many cases it is the father who wants equal time and presses the court for overnights. But it is in the waking hours that children will, experience, explore, feel safe with and enjoy their father. More time with this parent should be scheduled during daytime, but the child should be returned to his or her familiar secure environment during the night. Both the child and parents will thrive by avoiding unexpected separations during the night when the usual level of anxiety and fear is heightened.

As previously mentioned, in some cases it is not the mother but the father, grandparent or nanny who may be the child's primary caregiver. Overnights away from this attachment figure and familiar sleep routines can cause equivalent anxiety and distress. This is especially true for children under three who have limited language and cannot understand or be prepared for what may be occurring. Eventually, by the time a child is 6 or 7, he or she will often ask to have a "sleepover" away from home. This is an important event in a child's life.

Unfortunately, today the primary focus is on the "rights" of parents and not on the emotional needs and development of the child. Biblical King Solomon was confronted with a similar problem when two women claimed the same infant. To avoid cutting the baby in half, he opted for the woman whose love impelled her to give up her child to the other woman, in order to save its life. In a similar fashion a father or mother who loves his or her child will avoid the unnecessary trauma which can occur because of insistence upon premature nighttime visitations.

It is essential to educate parents, lawyers, and the court so that they understand and respect the difference between overnights and day time visitations. It is important to fashion compassionate and common sense custody orders that reflect such knowledge as well as taking into consideration each individual case. With this insight much pain and stress can be avoided.

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