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Habit stacking: Lyndsey Hookway BSc RNC SCPHN (HV) IBCLC

Habit stacking is based on behaviour change psychology and is a super gentle technique.

This is a great option if the way your child falls asleep is becoming unsustainable. I want to make it clear that the following are not 'bad habits', sleep 'props', 'crutches', or 'associations'. This is normal parenting. However, if any of these are becoming problematic, then it's also fine to gently introduce some changes:

- Feeding
- Rocking
- Pushing in the pram/stroller/pushchair
- Driving in the car
- Bouncing
- Holding/cuddling

It is hard to stop doing something that has become the norm. So, if you decide that you can't sustain feeding your little one to sleep every time, and would rather be able to pat them to sleep, that's fine, but as far as your baby knows, they ALWAYS fall asleep feeding, so patting will not initially help.

What you can do instead, is layer a new habit onto one that already works well. In this way, the new behaviours you want to become habits are added onto the behaviour that is already working well. So, you *carry on* feeding to sleep, but you add in patting. You can add in other layers of support as well – such as shushing, an essential oil in a diffuser, or a song.

What you'll do is spend a few weeks stacking these new habits. Remember it takes time to change habits! I'd allow about 4 weeks for this to work, but you can theoretically start this whenever you like. Then, when you're ready, stop the parenting behaviour that's become tricky and leave the others in place. You'll need to prepare for it to take a little longer to settle your little one, but you can go as slowly as you like, and spend as long on each stage of moving it along as you like. Some little ones don't cry at all with this strategy, which is why we like it!

One last hint: A great way to help little ones learn to accept a different way of falling asleep is to temporarily make bedtime much later. This will increase the sleep pressure, and many babies are more tolerant of being helped to sleep in a different way if they are super tired.

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For more responsive, evidence-based sleep tips and support:

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