

## **Why the evidence demands a re-think of popular clinical approaches to regulatory problems in early life if we are to optimise infant mental health**

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Environmental factors during the critical window of the first months of life shape the epigenome, impacting on neurobiological and microbiome development and mental health outcomes life-long. Yet the health system response to the common regulatory problems of early life remains siloed across multiple disciplines, with parents reporting confused and conflicting advice. For example, the dominant advice given to parents concerning infant sleep problems derives from first wave behavioural strategies, which are shown in high level evidence to not decrease frequency of night waking or reliably improve maternal mental health. Although associations exist between unsettled infant behaviour in first months of life and sleep and behavioural problems in later childhood, there is no reliable evidence to support the advice that parents must 'teach' their baby to sleep to optimise sleep and developmental outcomes. The association could also be explained by the widespread application of first wave behavioural interventions, which increase sleep anxiety in many infants and their families. Rich sensorimotor experiences optimise developmental outcomes, yet FWB sleep interventions decrease an infant's exposure to richly varied sensory stimulation, with the problematising of stimulation and a focus on sleep routines in a quiet, dim room during the day. Excessive crying, particularly if persistent, has been linked with developmental and behavioural problems in later childhood. Crying durations are modifiable according to infant-care practices, yet inappropriate medicalisation of cry-fuss behaviour is widespread.

This paper gives an overview of the evidence-base for Neuroprotective Developmental Care, which has been developed out of systematic reviews of extensive and interdisciplinary research literatures and preliminary evaluations. NDC has been delivered clinically since 2011, and taught to over a thousand health professionals in Australia and overseas to date. NDC offers a paradigm shift in the current approaches to the care of infant mental health in the first months of life.