Honoring Cultural Traditions and Practice While Promoting AAP Safe Sleep

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Babies sleep safely when the infant safe sleep guidelines are followed. Discussing infant safe sleep in a culturally respectful way can help prevent sleep-related infant deaths. For professionals working with families, this means recognizing that sleep practices are deeply rooted in culture, history, and lived experience, while still promoting the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) safe sleep standards.

Cultural Traditions and Practices

According to the Task Force on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (2016) infant sleep practices vary widely across cultures and can be tied to values like bonding, safety, breastfeeding, and responsiveness.

- **Room-sharing and co-sleeping norms**: Common in African, Asian, Indigenous, and Latino cultures. It is also growing in popularity in the breastfeeding community.
- **Cradleboards**: Traditional infant carrying and sleep practices in some Indigenous communities.
- **Portable baskets** (e.g., Moses baskets, wahakura): Traditional infant sleep practice in some Indigenous, African, Asian cultures and some religious communities.
- **Floor sleeping**: Traditional infant sleep practice in some Asian cultures.
- **Use of wraps (baby wearing) or hammocks** (cross cultural): Traditional infant carrying and sleep practices.

Respect In Practice

- Lead with curiosity, not correction.
- Listen first and affirm strengths.
- Discuss safety within cultural context to bridge the gap.
- Offer culturally adaptable solutions. (Moon et. al, 2024) Review the cultural practice and possible bridge to safe sleep in the chart below.

Cultural Practice	**Bridge to Safe Sleep**
Bed-sharing	Sidecar bassinet next to bed
Desire for closeness	Room-sharing
Floor sleeping	Use firm, separate infant surface on floor
Swaddling traditions	Ensure proper technique + back sleeping

A safety-only approach without respect for cultural and family preferences or norms can shut down trust.

Practice In the Field
(Moon et. al, 2024)

Scenario 1: Bed-Sharing Family
Response:
- Validate: “Many families do this for closeness.”
- Educate: “We know babies are safest on their own surface.”
- Offer: “Would you be open to trying a crib right next to your bed?”

Scenario 2: Grandparent Influence
Response:
- “Sleep guidance has changed as we’ve learned more about safety.”
- Invite them into conversation respectfully.
- Share the Building Blocks of Infant Safe Sleep for Grandparents with a family.

Scenario 3: Infant Won’t Sleep in Crib
Response:
- Normalize: “That’s very common.”
- Problem-solve:
  - Swaddling (safe method).
  - White noise.
  - Consistent routines.

Many different factors can influence a parent’s sleep choices, including cultural traditions. When talking to families about infant safe sleep, it is important to move beyond just providing education, but to have open, non-judgmental conversations. To learn more about how to have conversations about safe sleep, view the Online Trainings page on the Infant Safe Sleep Website.

References
Moon RY, Carlin RF, Hand I; AAP Task Force on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; AAP Committee on Fetus and Newborn. Sleep-Related Infant Deaths: Updated 2022 Recommendations for Reducing Infant Deaths in the Sleep Environment. Pediatrics. 2022;150(1):e2022057990

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