

Ask the Pediatrician

Solving the Riddles of Parenthood



1. Night Moves

Q: Is it okay for my 9-month-old son to reposition himself during nighttime sleep? I know Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) mostly happens from 1 to 4 months or so, but when I place him on his back at night, he turns over and moves all around in the bed, sometimes up into its corners. I am afraid of SIDS or suffocation.

A: Babies typically begin exploring different sleep positions anywhere from 4 to 7 months of age, often rolling over on their tummies after being put to sleep on their backs. Experts say moving all over the bed is normal, and fortunately tends to occur when babies are old enough that they are at less risk of SIDS, making it unnecessary for parents to disrupt a baby's much-needed rest (not to mention their own) by flipping him back. That said, there are several things parents can realistically do to continue to minimize the risk of SIDS and promote safe sleep habits for their infants.

First Candle, a national non-profit health organization dedicated to advancing infant health and survival, advises parents to:

- Make sure to put your baby to sleep on a firm, soft mattress
- Allow nothing in the crib with your baby except for a firm mattress and well-fitted sheet
- Keep your baby from becoming overheated
- Keep your baby away from tobacco smoke.

QUICK TIP: Never put your baby to sleep on a chair, sofa, waterbed, cushion, or sheepskin.

2. Don't Play with Fire (Ants)

Q: My family recently moved to Oklahoma, and our lawn has been "invaded" by fire ants. Are fire ants dangerous to my children?

A: Unfortunately, the answer is yes, they can be. Fire ants were accidentally introduced in the United States in the early 20th century. The small, brownish-red pests live in colonies, with populations up to 300,000, and their mounds are attractive to unknowing children because they resemble a sand pile. They can be dangerous to pets and children—especially those who have a severe allergy to this type of ants.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fire ants clamp onto their targets with powerful jaws and sting their victims repeatedly. Each sting injects a dose of venom that causes a burning sensation. The stings raise itching blisters that can become infected. Children who are allergic to fire ants may develop hives, swelling of the face, and breathing problems.

If your child is stung, remove all fire ants from her body. If the bites are not too severe, clean the affected areas thoroughly and apply an over-the-counter antihistamine. If symptoms worsen or your child has difficulty breathing, contact your pediatrician or emergency medical services immediately.

QUICK TIP: If your child is stung by fire ants, be on the lookout for any signs of difficulty breathing, and be ready to call 9-1-1 immediately should you have any concerns.

3. Coming to Grips with Grief

Q: A few months ago, my father passed away. My 10-year-old daughter was very close to him and is devastated over his death. How can I help her cope with her grief?

A: The reality of death is difficult for everyone, but especially for young children because they don't have emotional maturity to understand what has happened or the communication skills to express grief. Many experts recommend the following:

- If the death is recent, allow your daughter to decide if she wants to attend the funeral.
- Avoid confusing terms, such as “passed away” or “went to sleep.”
- Let your daughter know it's OK to talk about what has happened. Reassure and comfort her without denying the reality of death.
- Children need a normal routine, so try to maintain your family's regular schedule as much as possible.
- Children often blame themselves when a loved one dies. Assure your daughter that her grandfather's death was not her fault. If you're having trouble assuring your daughter, consider professional grief counseling to help her sort out her feelings.

QUICK TIP: Encourage your daughter write a good-bye letter or create a treasure box of all the things that remind her of her grandfather.

4. Teachable Moment

Q: My 13-year-old daughter is a big fan of Jamie Lynn Spears, the 16-year-old star of Nickelodeon's *Zoey 101* who just had a baby. Should I talk to my daughter about the choices her favorite TV star has made?

A: Sara F. Forman, M.D., of the Children's Hospital in Boston, offers the following advice to parents: “Jamie Lynn Spears's pregnancy is a wonderful opportunity for parents to engage their children in conversation about sexuality and a variety of issues, including the effectiveness of birth control, STDs, and larger issues such as statutory rape, which is a part of the story that is starting to get a lot of attention.

“When engaging in sexual activity, there is more to worry about than just pregnancy. If you don't want you kids having sex at 16, it's time to engage them in a conversation about your attitudes about that. It is also a way for parents to hear from their kids, as opposed to just lecturing them. Parents should share their own values and beliefs, and even if their kids may not agree with them, they will hear them. Establishing an open line of communication minimizes risk.”

QUICK TIP: Discuss sex directly and openly with your children.



5. Diets and Prenatal Asthma/Allergy

Q: I am pregnant, and my best friend suggested I follow a Mediterranean diet because it protects babies from developing asthma. What exactly is a Mediterranean diet and is it safe?

A: A Mediterranean diet is a diet rich in fish, fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes, nuts, dairy products, and olive oil. According to the January issue of the online journal *Thorax*, mothers from the Mediterranean island of Menorca who ate vegetables more than eight times a week, fish more than three times a week, and legumes more than once a week during pregnancy were less likely to have children with asthma and allergies.

In newly published guidelines aimed at preventing allergy and asthma in high-risk children, however, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reported that there is no convincing evidence linking a mother's diet during pregnancy to her child's risk for allergic disease. So, while a Mediterranean diet is safe for an expectant mother provided it's a balanced diet and meets AAP guidelines, the evidence of it being effective in preventing asthma and allergies is still very premature.

QUICK TIP: Pregnant women should eat a balanced diet, avoiding unpasteurized cheeses, certain types of fish, and alcohol.