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Baby Steps Toward Sleep: Using Instructional Design in Everyday Life

January 7, 2019 | By Carolyn Levally
Instructional Design

As a mom to a little girl who will be turning one shortly, I've realized that I've quite suddenly become a teacher of basic life skills for her – how to eat, how to go to sleep, how to walk, etc. For the first few months of her life, I used a cold hard approach to teaching some of these skills, such as “let's just put a bottle in her mouth and hope that she takes it.” When this tactic failed miserably, I started considering applying instructional design to my teaching strategy, especially the concept of “chunking” learning. Having worked with instructional designers for several years now, I have learned some of the basic design principles so I could better understand the design process and create instructional media. “Chunking” is breaking a large piece of learning down into bite-size pieces of learning so students can master small tasks before performing the large, overarching task or goal.

So I thought, what do I have to lose? And I started to apply the concept of chunking learning to some of the greatest problems of all – a baby who won't fall asleep on her own and won't sleep through the night. What follows is the process we're going through together.

Identifying the Problem

Our problem was that my sweet little girl hated to fall asleep at night. She wailed, cried, and would only eventually fall asleep if we rocked/bounced her vigorously while standing up (heaven forbid we sit down). She also would wake up very frequently after she was asleep. It was an exhausting process for all of us, so we needed to improve the experience, stat!

Determining the Desired Outcomes

We had two desired outcomes that we wanted our learning/training to accomplish. If I wrote these outcomes like the Institute's design team does for our students, the outcomes would be like this:

Upon successful completion of this training, the baby will be able to:

1. Fall asleep in her crib by herself.

2. Sleep through the night.

Both outcomes are simply measurable, as a “does she or doesn’t she” do these actions.

Chunking the Learning

Now came the time when I started designing the learning. I’d need to break the process down into small steps or bite-sized chunks, help the baby learn and get accommodated to those small achievements, and then build on those achievements. Here are the steps that followed and are still going through.

Step 1: Since our baby would only fall asleep being rocked while we stood, my first goal was to help her fall asleep by rocking her while sitting in a rocking chair. She was not pleased, to say the least, but eventually, she learned how to fall asleep while we were sitting down and rocking together.

Step 2: Remain sitting in the rocking chair, but no rocking. So much flailing ensued.

Step 3: Transition from falling asleep sitting still in my lap to falling asleep laying on a mattress. For this step, we laid down together in my large bed, so I could demonstrate to her how to lie on a mattress to fall asleep – i.e., to try to keep her from logrolling all around the bed.

Step 4: Learning how to fall asleep in her crib, but with mom or dad still there. This is the stage we’re in now. I rub her back, sing her songs, and sit on the floor and let her hold my hand through the crib slats until she falls asleep. There are tears and struggles, but the tears are a lot less than when she’s alone in her crib.

Planned Step 5: Stop holding her hand, but stay sitting right next to the crib so she can see me as she falls asleep.

Planned Step 6: Sit farther back from the crib as she falls asleep.

Planned Step 7: Stand by the door until she falls asleep.

Planned Step 8: She falls asleep by herself without us in the room! (The chorus sings!)

Of course, this is all tentative, and I’m not certain if the final steps will work. This training is also only addressing the first desired outcome; I’ve yet to figure out the steps to help her learn to sleep through the night. However, using this method of breaking down the instruction and mastering one small skill at a time has really made a difference for our baby’s learning. What used to take hours now takes a fraction of the time, and we’re also making strides towards her final skill set and independence. I’ve begun using this method on a number of other skills as well, and we’ve seen the similar successes.

How about you? Have you used instructional design principles in various parts of your personal life? Maybe with a child, a pet, or yourself? Which principles? Was it successful? Let us know!

About the Author

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Carolyn LeVally is a content editor for Franklin University's International Institute for Innovative Instruction.