



# Sweet dreams

Amid the maze of the digital age, it's time to return to our instincts, according to two Australian parenting authors, writes **Mike Bruce**

**T**hey can be brutal, those first weeks of motherhood — the struggle for solutions to crying, feeding and settling through a catatonic fog. And the dizzying array of advice, manuals and internet forums with myriad approaches to parenting can often prove more hindrance than help. But Brisbane GP and academic Dr Pamela Douglas believes those first few weeks needn't be so complex and confounding.

In her first parenting book, *The Discontented Little Baby Book*, Douglas argues the case for “cued care”, or parenting by responding “sensibly to your baby’s needs, as opposed to the philosophy of delayed response”.

The mother-of-five and grandmother-of-four has distilled her 25-plus years as a GP and integrated it with evidence from a

range of fields such as medical science, evolutionary biology, behavioural psychology and cross-cultural studies, to create an integrated, holistic approach to raising babies in their first 16 weeks. Her title is an obvious play on *The Contented Little Baby Book*, the bestseller by controversial British author Gina Ford, aka the Queen of Routine.

While Douglas won't comment on or compare directly, it's clear that Ford's

approach of strict conditioning, sleep training and spacing out feeds stands at the other end of the spectrum to Douglas's conclusions from 25 years as a GP and 15 years of research.

“We don't need to ‘teach’ babies to sleep but only to remove the obstacles that get in the way,” Douglas says. “It's about cued care, rather than not responding to their baby's cues or delaying those responses or responding in a way that's different to what they know is the baby's intention.”

Douglas, 53, says considerable research has found that controlled crying and strict sleep training, which fall into the “first-wave behaviourism” (FWB) approach of conditioning babies, have limited benefit for baby and family when applied in the first six months, and can even make babies more unsettled.

“There's evidence to suggest that FWB approaches can make babies even more unsettled and make babies cry even more. They certainly make parents increasingly housebound as

they strive to get their baby into these sleep routines,” Douglas says. “And yet one of the best things a mother can do is to be out and about and be socially engaged during this period.”

Douglas and a research co-author looked at 43 international studies investigating FWB approaches and found that they may increase the length of time a baby sleeps at night without waking the parents very little and far more modestly than assumed. They also showed the approach did not equate to improvements in the baby's sleep habits longer term.

“Parents are told they must teach the baby to sleep by three months otherwise they will develop bad sleep habits, but this does not accrue benefits further down the track.”

Douglas also questions the accepted wisdom of the “feed, play, sleep” routine, which she argues can actually interfere with healthy baby sleep, advocating instead greater flexibility based on responding, or at least intending to respond, to baby's signals which stem from two needs — hunger for milk and hunger for healthy amounts of varied sensory stimulation. Long periods in quiet, darkened rooms during the day, for example, can exacerbate crying and sleep problems, she writes (see separate story).

Farther up the chain of parenting challenges, Dr Christopher Green, has released the fifth edition of his best-selling *Toddler Taming*, tailored to the modern, digital age. With parents



drowning in a torrent of information from the web, it was timely to reiterate the vital and irrefutable truths of dealing with toddlers that are as relevant today as when he first wrote the book in 1984.

“This is about the rock-solid truths, of which I think there are about 20 that will always be right, that were right for grandmother and the grandchildren to come,” Green, 71, says.

Using diversion tactics to stem a tantrum, nurturing a tension-free home or not rushing toilet training are timeless tenets, he says, but in the context of the confusing maze of the internet, bear repeating.

“Parents will go to Google long before they go to grandma, which I think is very sad,” Green notes.

“People are absolutely buried and constantly thinking ‘am I doing as well as everybody else?’ I think those people just need to cool off a bit, as children undoubtedly feel their parents’ stress.”

• **THE DISCONTENTED LITTLE BABY BOOK**  
UQ Press, \$29.95

• **TODDLER TAMING**  
Doubleday, \$35



