

THURSDAY, JANUARY 10TH 2013

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Home  
 Columns  
 Creative Nonfiction  
 Fiction  
 Literary Reflections  
 Poetry  
 Profiles  
 Reviews  
 Blog

## SEARCH

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 RSS Feeds  Twitter

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 Contributors  
 Submissions  
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 Privacy Policy

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 Literary Mama Gear

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 INDIE  
 BOOKSTORES**

## BLOG

## Can You Stomach This?

DENISE SCHIPANI

June 17, 2006

Call the American Academy of Pediatrics; turn me in. Call the SIDS foundation folks. Tell 'em all I did the unthinkable. I bucked the advice. I put my babies, both of them, to sleep on their tummies. And if I danced around that truth before, now I'm willing to admit it, to own up, to tell the world that I put my own instinct (unhoned as it was when I started this parenting gig) ahead of received wisdom.

I didn't set out to defy this rule -- the one that states all babies be put to sleep on their backs, all the time. Pregnant, I had the best of intentions. With the smugness (or is it naiveté?) we're prone to when the babe is still safely tucked on the inside, I believed that the experts must have it right. Plus, I'd seen the research; I knew that an unbroken line could be drawn between the Back to Sleep campaign and the plummeting rates of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

In the hospital after giving birth, I watched, dazed with post-C-section painkillers and puffy with IV-induced edema, as the nurses swaddled my son, Daniel, with such deftness and speed that I despaired of ever doing it myself, and laid him, face-up, in his rolling plastic bassinette with the chipper "I'm a boy!" sign taped to its side. Later I did my own sloppy swaddling, and placed him the way I'd been shown. The way all the books admonished me to do. The way the articles in the baby magazines practically hyperventilated about. The advice was written in a friendly tone ("best to put baby to sleep on his back!") but the subtext, though subtle, was clear ("don't you dare put that baby to sleep on his tummy!").

It worked. For the four days in the hospital, anyway.

Then I took Daniel home. As my drugs wore off, as my scar slowly healed, as we both became adjusted to the rhythms (which is to say, lack of rhythm) of home, my son started crying. And crying, and crying. Our pediatrician showed us how to flex his legs into his chest to help him expel the excess gas he couldn't get out on his own. I bought gripe water from England on the Internet. I pumped my milk and tried low-air-flow bottles. I gave him very, very weak chamomile tea. My husband drove him around and the block. And still he screamed.

When Daniel was three weeks old, I took him to my parents' house for Thanksgiving. My mom, handling her new grandson, tried all her moves, honed over three children and three older grandchildren: She held him draped over her arm, over her lap as she rubbed his back. And, without consulting me, she put him down for a nap--face down. "You can't do that!" I yelled. "He has to sleep on his back."

But my mom hadn't read the articles. She was going by sight, and the sight was plain enough: my tense little baby had relaxed, flattened out, fallen peacefully to sleep. He did seem to like it that way. Before, no matter how gently I placed him face-up, he flailed a bit, his eyes wide, as though he was falling through space, as though he didn't trust the firm crib mattress beneath

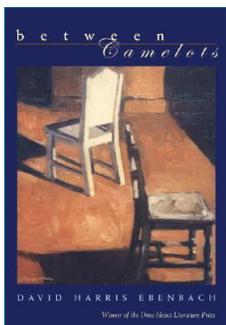
## CAN YOU STOMACH THIS?

 No comments

**Denise Schipani** is the mother of two boys in Huntington, New York. Her articles and essays on parenting issues, health, fitness and other subjects have appeared in *Parenting*, *Parents*, *American Baby*, *The Washington Post*, *Redbook*, *Woman's Day* and *Women's Health*.

More from Denise Schipani

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him. Maybe all that air above him freaked him out. Maybe being on his belly physically soothed him the way a hot water bottle might.

Seeing my child snooze this way gave me the nerve to continue putting him tummy-down. My confidence grew. Daniel was a big baby, and strong. From his tummy, he could lift his head--in fact, he could raise his whole upper body in mini-push-ups--from the age of 3 or 4 weeks. When I'd put him down to sleep after a nighttime feeding, I found could tiptoe back to my bed (really, one thin wall away) knowing that he could easily lift and turn his head if need be. By 11 weeks old, he was sleeping through the night.

When I had son number two, James, I started again with the back-sleeping routine. But it wasn't long before he, too, made it clear that he really preferred snooze on his tummy, thank you very much.

So here's what I think: I think the Back to Sleep campaign has done a marvelous job, a necessary job. (Though of course parents now have to worry about plagiocephaly, and about giving their back-sleeping tots equal waking time on their tummies--not life threatening issues, of course, but just something else to consider.) I think we're all wiser and better parents thanks to the wealth of research-based, well-thought-out information available to us. The books, the magazines, the doctors: They all help shed welcome light on the perplexing world of first-time newborn care. But all this information may come at a price, and that is the dulling of our own instincts. We're used to deferring to experts; after all, would we refinish an antique armoire or invest in the stock market without first sifting through expert opinion? But when we put all our trust in the parenting gurus, listen to them slavishly rather than discriminatingly, we have less trust in our own budding parental wisdom. Expert voices shouldn't drown out the inner voice that tells you what your baby wants, what your baby needs.

And my babies, quite simply, needed to sleep on their stomachs.



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#### COMMENTS

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