Sleep training, self-soothing & other thorny issues

**Intro**

Welcome to Sense by Meg Faure the podcast that's brought to you by Parent Sense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you are a new parent, then you are in good company. Your host, Meg Faure, is a well-known OT infant specialist and the author of eight parenting books. Each week we are going to spend time with new mums and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges, and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the Parent Sense App and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life. And now meet your host.

**Meg:** Welcome back Mums and dads. I am Meg Faure and I am super delighted to be with you here today on Sense by Meg Faure. Each week we go and debunk a couple of the questions that come up for new mums and it's often around how do I get my baby to sleep or is my baby teething? And sometimes we have experts on with us. And this morning I am super, super excited because I am joined by Samantha Hurst and Samantha is a journalist, she also runs the Great Equalizer podcast and it's a parenting podcast focused on all the issues around parenting and it's an absolutely incredible podcast. So if you have not listened to it, please do pop over to the Great equalizer. It really is a fabulous look at all the issues that come up with parenting, but I'm super excited to have Sam here with me today. She's the mum of two little ones; Elijah who is six, and Noah who is two. So she's right at the rock face.

And in addition to that, she's a journalist who works with Parent24 who really does exposes on all the things around parenting matters. And so I'm super excited to have you here today with me, Sam.

**Sam:** Thank you so much, Meg. It's so nice to be on the show.

**Meg:** And so when Sam and I were chatting about how we were going to approach topics for today, she said, what do you think we should do? And I said, you know what? Why don't we just throw ourselves right into the most thorny issues possible and pick up all those big controversial debates and let's just have fun and have a look at what the science says about the things that have thrown out there on social media.
So that's exactly what we did and Sam sent me a whole list of questions and topics and some of them are super thorny. So, let's see what we can get into today.

**Sam:** Oh gosh, Meg, I love the thorny, I love the thorny issues. I love it when…Because this gets people riled up, right. I don’t know if you saw that there was a sort of New York, was it The New Yorker? Did an expose on TikTok, had a big thing on sleep training, you know, sleep training versus attachment parenting, which I know that we are going to get stuck in because that was one of the big things and it's one of the big things that we talk about on, on the Great Equalizer. So I don't know, I'd really, really love to hear what you have to say about that because you've written Sleep Sense.

**Meg:** Yeah, absolutely. So, and it's so interesting because that is one of our probably top thorny issues. In fact, just last year I was taken, or in fact it was it this year I was taken to task by a person on Instagram around my approach to sleep, getting little ones to sleep. And she had picked up on the word that I use, which is self-soothing. And she said there is there such a thing, baby shouldn't be expected to self-soothe. You're forcing babies to do things that they're not ready to do. And she did it publicly, which, you know, I always think rather take the approach of taking it directly because she probably would've learned more from me at the time if she'd done that. But she did take it public. It was a super interesting debate that her and I had. And of course I'm not one to go onto social media and slam people, so I just messaged her dm-ed her and I said, would you like to have a half an hour consultation with me where I can actually share the science of this with you? And that was exactly what we did because you're right, it's a super thorny issue.

**Meg:** So I mean there is…It does the rounds on Instagram, right, where Instagram, especially because I find that a lot of moms are on Instagram as opposed to a lot of the other. Okay, now there is TikTok, I can't bring myself to get their make, but maybe one day, maybe next time we chat, I'll be chatting more about words on TikTok. You do have a lot of sort of even psychological advice. You know, really short, sharp and punchy pieces of advice that hit you in the feels. And a lot of the sleep stuff, you know, shows how distraught babies are, how stressed out they are when you are told to cry it out for anybody that's actually read Sleep Sense, you know, that you, you're not necessarily promoting the cry it out method.

And that's not to, to also judge one way or the other. So where exactly did you go? Did you go with that? Because you have…For me, in parenting, there's always this great middle where it's a you-do-you approach. That's how Charlene and I always—my cohost, we always chat about that on the Great Equalizer, where I find that social media puts things in a really black and white, you know, scenario. And that's not real life. That's, and that has to do with everything related to parenting, right?

**Meg:** Yeah, absolutely. And you know, I think a lot of these debates get very polarized because you get people who sit either in one camp or in the other. And the reality is that just like you said, parenting isn't like that. It's not one camp or the other, it's a gray mess, and it's, we do what works because we are parents. So, let's have a look at sleep training and let's have a look at the pros and cons and attachment parenting and let's just have a look at little bit at the science as well.

So first of all, attachment to your little one is absolutely crucial. That emotional engagement with your new baby is, it really is key to all of their lifelong relationships. I have studied extensively on infant mental health. I'm part of the World Association of Infant Mental Health Membership and I really do believe in securing and protecting the baby's emotional world. So that is the first very important position to start. So how does attachment happen? Well, attachment happens in the context of a loving relationship that is, is super responsive and it has reflective parenting and that means that mom and dad, mom or dad, whoever and the primary caregivers are able to reflect on their baby's emotions and meet their baby's needs, and that is absolutely important.

Now that happens in, day time hours and it happens in nighttime hours, but in order to do that, parents do need to be emotionally available and there are things that make us not be emotionally available, and so massive levels of poverty and stress are two examples of that. And that's why when we look at the research on the highest risk factors for emotional development for children; it's actually poverty and violence. It’s really in, poverty really is, you know, they're very linked as well. So when mum or dad is super stressed, they're not going to be able to necessarily meet their babies needs as they should be able to.

Having said that, when we’re super tired and really, really sleep deprived, we can also be in a position where we are just not able to parent reflectively because we are at the end of the tether and any real mum who is honest has been in that space. And I certainly have, I've got three kids, I know what it's like to wake up in the morning and not know how I'm going to put one on foot in front of the other and by four o'clock in the afternoon to be ready to actually snap at my child just because of sheer exhaustion and in the middle of the night as well, don't stop crying in the middle of the night, I want to shake you, you know… And so we know that the reality of parenting and sleep deprived state makes it very, very hard to emotionally connect. So that's one of the things we know.

Another thing we know on an emotional level, and so it's important that we just, um, have a look at all this emotional stuff first. Another thing that we know is that human beings have to move through a trajectory towards self-regulation, and it happens for all infants. They start very, very dependent on their parents to help them self-regulate and they move towards total independence. And an example of self-regulation in a toddler is the fact that a toddler will have a massive meltdown and fall about all over the place. But that's not acceptable when you're 23 years old. So you need to move through these stages and I think you and I, on one of our podcasts that we're doing on the Great Equalizer actually going to look into self-regulation, and so if anyone's interested in that, they must pop on over to that, onto that episode. So babies have to be able to self-regulate and are able to learn to self-regulate. And self-regulation like any other milestone, like gross motor milestones happens in a trajectory.

And so at a certain age, babies are able to self-regulate and regulation of sleep or self-soothing is part and parcel of that. So there is an aged and stage where babies can self-sooth and should be expected to self-soothe.

**Sam:** Meg, can I interject? Don't you think that this is a semantics issue? Because I think if I have to talk about sort self-soothing and self-regulating and whatnot, then then we get onto dummy issues and breast versus using a dummy, which is also a points of contention or I won't say points of contention, I'll say points of judgment for a lot of mothers. Do you use a dummy? Don't you use a dummy? With my second, I could safely say, am I allowed to say bugger you? You know, bugger you, I'll do what I want and how I want to do it. With my first, it was a matter of, is it okay to introduce the dummy so early on? You know, you're more unsure than when my second came, I was less, or I was sure, I was more sure about a lot of things.

And I think that where the confusing parenting advice comes in, especially for first time parents is when you've got a lot of noise with social media, and with other generations, older generations and with other mothers, you do have a lot of confusing and you know, contradictory advice. And the thing is, you get one mom who can be like, my baby doesn't take a dummy, but that mom has the support system to be able to sit with her baby and soothe her baby all day long. Whereas you might have another mom who does not have that support system needs to go back to work. Some women in our country, let's be honest, some women in South Africa back have a baby on the Friday and need to be back at work on the Monday, that is a reality. And that is when we are giving black or white advice. Sure there's really good advice and there's science backed data and knowledge that we can put forward. But when it comes to, you know, actual advice with regard to your family, should we not be empowering moms to look at their situation objectively and their support system? And then to figure out from there, knowing the diet and knowing what's good, knowing what's soothing for a baby, scientifically knowing the best nutrition, because we are going to talk about nutrition as well, knowing the best type of nutrition for our baby and the best kind of simulation. Also lets factor in the mom support system.

**Interlude**
This episode is brought to us by Parent Sense, the all in one baby and parenting app that help you make the most of your baby's first year. Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby; when to feed them, how to wean them and why they won't sleep? Parent Sense app is like having a baby expert on your phone guiding you to parent with confidence, get a flexible routine, daily tips and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download Parent Sense App now from your app store, and take the guesswork out parenting.

**Meg:** You know, Sam, it's so important what you're speaking about because I mean, at the end of the day, and many years ago we used to talk about the mummy wars, which is this kind of massive judgment that one mom lashes on another just because of her personal experience. And I think the important thing to recognize is whenever you have an opinion on a parenting matter, every time it's based on your own lenses, it's based on what happened with your child and your next child could be very different. So, you know, it might have been that your child breast fed to sleep and yet slept through the night by nine months. And so, you know that's your perspective, that is normal; all babies can be breastfed to sleep, don't need to self sooth and they will sleep through at nine months. But that is actually a case study of one.

And I think very often people, and moms are actually basing their opinion on a case study of one, and that's incorrect to do that because you just don't know what another mom's going through. So in the scenario where a mom is really sleep deprived and is not able to meet her babies' needs emotionally during the day, I do advocate for helping babies to learn to self soothe. And because we know, we conclusively know this cannot be debated that babies who self-soothe are more likely to sleep through the night. And this is research that's been done extensively by a researcher called Thomas Anders and he looked at what are the hallmark features of babies who sleep through the night. And the reality is that they wake up as many times as every other baby who's nine months old or 10 months old or three years old, but they self soothe; they put themselves back to sleep.

So the only differential between a good sleeper and a bad sleeper is whether or not they can self, and I don't think anybody would debate that. Where the debate comes in is at what age should babies be encouraged to self-sooth and should we be teaching them to self-soothe? Now for me, self-soothing it's a strategy that has to be learned. It's an independent skill that a baby learns, and I'm not going to debate age right now, we'll get to that, but it's as much of a skill as learning to read in a six year old and is learning to drive a car in a 17 year old. It's a skill that has to be transmitted from a parent to a child. And that transmission of skills always happens in the context of a relationship. You will never get a child who learns to read at six years old with no exposure to reading and exposure to a relationship, likewise with driving a car. And it's exactly the same for self-soothing; a parent needs to come alongside a child and help them to learn to self soothe.

So, the bigger question, and this is where we get into the nuance of it, is at what age should they be learning it and how do we do it? What is our strategy? So, at what age? Babies under four months of age need an enormous amount of sensory care and that's cuddles and holding and touch and you know, all of that type of thing, they've come from a very sensory environment and babies under four months of age are just navigating state regulation, they're not ready to start navigating sleep properly. As soon as a baby is between five and seven months of age, they do need to start to learn to settle themselves, otherwise they will keep reactivating and keep calling back their parents. Which if you're a mom who's at home and doesn't have the pressure to going to work and sleep deprivation is not something that bothers you, then by all means that's a strategy to take. But if you're a mom who's needing her sleep, then between five and seven months of age is the age at which we know that babies can learn to self-sooth

And if you want to leave it later, you can leave it later as well. But the later you leave it, the more entrenched habits become, and that's a whole another story that's, you know, unrelated. Well I suppose it is related, but it's not self-soothing per se.

**Sam:** Me, I want to latch onto what you said because I think what a lot of parents struggle with is when experts or people in different fields mention the age that things should happen and when parents must do, because even as I'm on myself, I'm like, well actually must I do anything? Because there are so many musts in the calendar of the year that by the time it gets to November now, which is the month that we're in recording this, I am full up with people's musts and coulds and shoulds and probably by your third or fourth child you feel the same way. Like, no, I'm going to do this my way. So again, just to reiterate that this is what the science is. If you are a mom who can afford to have that lack of sleep and you have a support system coming in, by all means, if you are a mom who's struggling with sleep deprivation, lean into this advice. But I don't think, I don't know whether you would agree on this, and I think barring your child physically being harmed, there is no musts or shoulds in parenting. Is that…?

**Meg:** Absolutely, a hundred percent. Look, I will tell you this, that if you don't develop self-regulation and it's a trajectory, so I mean, as I said, people must go and listen to your podcast on it, the element that we're doing. But if you don't develop self-regulation across behavior and emotional regulation, you are going to have challenges in parenting a teenager that's a fact. And I've been through, I'm a seasoned mother who's gone through adolescence and the evidence is clear in the research as well that children do need to have boundaries and be able to self-regulate emotions and behavior, otherwise there's chaos. ADHD is an example of that. If you can't regulate your cognitive state which is the highest level of regulation, you are going to have problems.

So, you know, I do think yes, you are at leisure to choose your time and your leisure to choose your method, but you're not at leisure to prioritize, to deprioritize self-regulation. It is one of those things learn. It's the same as potty training. You can say that people can have an opinion, but if you have a 15 year old in a set of nappies, it's going to be a problem. It can't be done, you know, so at the end of the day, yep, you're at leisure to choose your time at leisure to choose your methodology, but you're not at leisure to say that my child doesn't have to learn to self-regulate if they do.

**Sam:** I love those because number one, it leans into discipline and the type of parenting that we choose to deploy. And number two, it leans into self- regulation of the parent, which is also something we're going to be chatting about on our episode. So, I don't want to chat too much about that, but that is, there's a lot of work that millennial parents in particular have to do that I don't think was true for parents’ generations before we know so much more. So now we need to learn to self-regulate. I know a bunch of older generation, people from older generation who don’t know how to self-regulate. So we are learning to self-regulate ourselves. We also need to be teaching these skills to then our parents. So in the sense that this leans into types of discipline, how would you navigate that, you know, timing wise because there's conflicting advice, there's so much we can unpack here.

In terms of your child as an autonomous individual who has the choice to eat whenever he or she wants or, you know, feel their feelings, you spoke about having those tantrums, et cetera. So we are leaning into age old advice and stuff that becomes contentious issues, sugar, screen time, and then quote-unquote the naughty corner, which is now outdoor along with corporal punishment for good reasons, but there's so much to unpack in terms of parenting with people. The mommy war kind of still exists, but really silently because the judgment continues, right.

**Meg:** Yeah. So each of those little topics that you brought up, including by the way sleep, you're actually alluding to one single thing, and that's boundaries. And particularly with discipline, boundaries are very, very important. And one of the things with millennial parents, and I don't think that they're alone in this, I think that many other generations have battled with this as well, but it's becoming increasingly a problem as we go through the generations is we have a fear of instilling boundaries in our children because we are scared of their anger and scared of them not being perfectly happy all the time. And you know, this pursuit of my child always being happy and never crying and never and having life go a hundred percent according to plan is a problem. And because it's not real life, real life's not going to do that for your child. And you do your child no favors when you don't instill boundaries.

So the truth is that they do need to be boundaries and there need to be boundaries specifically around things that are safety related, but also around other things like an etiquette and kindness. And you know, those boundaries are important and there's a great TED talk around, don't make your number one priority your child's happiness because you're going to set them up for depression later in life. It was a brilliant Ted talk, I'll try and find it and pop it into the show notes. But what's really interesting is that when we prioritize our children's happiness, we make sure that everything goes their way, and so we give into everything. You know, if they want to co-sleep with us, you know, until they're five years old and we've got seven children in the bed and it doesn't suit our marriage, we still will allow them to do that as an example, because we are terrified of their anger, we're terrified of their tantrums. And people don't want to face the tantrums, they don't want to put in the boundaries because they don't want to see their children unhappy. And I think as parents we need to really look at the reason why we are giving into sugar, TV, whatever it is, you know, your head can go anywhere because if it's got to do with just making sure that our children's lives are absolutely perfect all the time, well then there's a problem because it's not supposed to be like that.

Now that doesn't mean that boundaries are harsh, and that boundaries are limiting, that boundaries need to…That children need to be in place of discomfort all the time. It means that we need to identify our children's emotions ahead of instilling boundaries and say, I know that this is how you’re feeling, or I know that is what you want.
Then put in place the boundary and then give children a choice, that’s incredibly important. It is one of Erikson's, when we look at the psychology, he said that the two developmental outcomes that come out of the little ones, kind of toddler years, the other one is the autonomy and the other one is doubts, and none of us want our child to doubts themselves who want a child who's autonomous. And autonomy comes down to giving your child choices, you know, and that doesn't mean that you mustn't instill boundaries, that you must instill boundaries, but you can also do it in the context of choices. So my approach to discipline has always been the ABC approach. And we actually did an episode on my podcast with us so people can go and check it out. The A stands for acknowledge; meaning acknowledge your child's emotions. The B stands for boundaries; because children need boundaries, don't fear their unhappiness. And the C stands for choice; give them choices that they can live with and it's something they just can't live with. So that things, you know, kind of go your way.

Now sometimes and you know, I want to just cut back up on what you said about the naughty chair or the quiet space, whatever you want to call it. Sometimes children do need to be removed from situations and there needs to be a type of separation that gives a very clear message and that's what the naughty chair or the time out, you know, as it's known, that's what it does. Time out is really just a way for us to say, right, I'm separating you from social engagement, which of course children hate because you need to know that this is something that you cannot do again. And an example of that would be, you know, biting a sibling or hitting the newborn over the head with a pan, you've got to be able to have something you know, that you can go to and say, right, this is an absolutely no-go space for you. And that's where, you know, things like the naughty corner come in.

**Sam:** So, I've got two things to say on that, Meg, and with a disclaimer, because although I'm a parenting journalist, this is what I do. I lean into information from people like you and educational psychologists and other parenting experts as someone who's in it. I don't even have teenagers, I don't consider myself an expert. So let me just put that out there. However, on the topic of the naughty corner, I think again, we're leaning into semantics. Okay, do away with the word naughty, do away with even a corner, don't you need a timeout every now and then, I know I do. Sometimes I send my husband for a timeout. We all need it because life gets overwhelming and over-stimulating, so I'm going to put that out there.

Secondly, on the topic of choice and boundaries, there was an educational psychologist, the Joburg based educational psychologist, her name's Zaakira Mohamed, I'm pretty sure she's the one who told me this. But I lean into it in parenting very often, especially with my toddler these days, who's trying to establish his autonomy and that's okay. It's time, it's time for bed now. And he might really not be interested in a time for bed. So, you know, in it being the bath bedtime scenario. So what's really working for me right now is giving him choices within that. His name's Noah. I'm really sorry Noah, it's time. You need to put your toys down, but I tell you what, do you want to choose the yellow bath bomb or the blue one? Do you want to read? Do you want to read Goodnight Room? Is it Goodnight Room? Why is my brain not working because I don't have a lot of sleep, because I've got a two-year-old. Do you want to read X or do you want to read Y? Or, here are the 10 Harry Makati Books. Guess what? You get to choose that. And it completely flips the script for him. He's not focused on the fact that he doesn't want to do bath and bedtime now, now he's excited about bath and bedtime because he gets to choose the color of the bath bomb.

Again, by no means a parenting experts, it might have worked last night, they might come a day where that doesn't work. But that's really an example for me of, has a boundary. It's bedtime. But you've got some options that gives you your autonomy, which is helping, really helpful to me as a parent.

**Interlude**
If you enjoy my podcast, I would like to share one of my favorite podcasts with you, the Honest Hour. Christina Masuriek is mom to two boys and a third little boy on the way. She's an American expat living in Cape Town, South Africa since 2008, and decided to start sharing her experiences in parenting since 2017. Having grown up in a dysfunctional family environment in her own childhood, which led to her adoption at the age of 10, Christina is passionate about finding purpose and presence in parenting, as well as exploring our own opportunity for healing and personal growth as we navigate the world of parenting our own children. Christina believes in ending the trauma cycle and that in parenting our own children we can learn how to re-parent ourselves. So pop on over to Christina's podcast, the Honest Hour,

**Meg:** An honest semantics around what you call the Naughty corner. I've never called it that ever, and in fact, in Play Sense, which is my playgroup program, we call it the Peace Cushion. And it's so interesting because our little ones, a big part of the Play Sense program is teaching little ones to self-regulate their very big emotions. Because that's a toddler’s challenge really, they've got to learn to regulate emotions at that time. And one of my teachers told me the most delightful story that one of her little ones had been really battling and he was overstimulated and it's been a busy day and he was a sensitive little one and he came up to her and he said, I need a bit of time in the peace cushion, and he took himself off and sat in the peace cushion. And that was a classic example of what you're speaking about, that if you don't frame it negatively, if you don't put it into this right, it's always a punishment, but you put it into something that you'll feel better after that little ones can start to realize that this is actually a self-regulation strategy. And my middle child interestingly, is one of the most self-regulated human beings I know. I mean I've got a case study of three, so obviously I don't have a massive case study, but it's a case study of three. And I can tell you that when I watched her growing up, it was like watching self-regulation kind of play out in real life. And she used to come home from school every single day from two years old. She would walk into her bedroom, she'd close the door, she'd put her toys out on the floor and she would play for an hour and a half. It was her own time out. That's what she needed, you know, and she would come out as bright and cheer as possible, whereas the others would get home from school and inevitably there'd be a temper tantrum because they'd had a busy day at school. They were feeling frenetic or whatever it was, you know. So, you know, I think we need to, you're right, it is semantics. We do need to reposition this as something that's positive. It's something that allows a mental defrag and you know, I use the word defrag often when I talk about sensory overstimulation because we do need time in which our brains can actually just have time to defrag, and that's what a time out space can do.

**Sam:** So leaning into that, Meg, I'd like to put out there for other parents that we need to be giving each other grace. You speak about having a case study of three, I've only got a case study of two. I'm pretty sure that that's where it's going to end. But I called it the naughty corner with my first that was the advice that was given to me. I went and sort out discipline advice, we were told about the Naughty Corner and that became a thing in my home. Once Noah came along, who is my second, I knew better and I decided to do something different in my home and it's now just called the Corner, and as you mention, Noah now takes himself to the corner. He tells me I'm grumpy, I'm going to the corner. And he goes and he goes and sits in the designated corner where it's a sense of shame for my eldest Elijah. Do I feel guilty about that? Yeah, I do because Elijah has that…

**Meg:**  Same guilt.

**Sam:** I do. I have that mom guilt. Elijah has that sense of shame. However, it's a daily choice for me to go out there as a parent and to give myself that forgiveness and that grace that, you know what? That was what I knew to do at the time, and when you know better, you do better, so now I'm doing better and I can always un-teach that shame, you know, kind of counteract that shame with Elijah, which is, I think my basic message in navigating all of that for other parents is what I'm trying to do myself. And that's just to give ourselves a lot of grace because there's really no…We can call ourselves parenting experts or we want, there's no right or wrong way to go about this, we all just navigating this really tough terrain, right?

**Meg:** And maybe that's the theme, you know, I mean when we talked about setting up a podcast on this theme, which was let's take the really thorny issues, you know, it was really, it's really scary to go in with the thorny issues.

**Meg:** And I mean we have a list of about another 10, so we'll have to do another episode. But I think the biggest theme to come out of this is, you know, is we talk about gentle parenting as in parent your children gently. But actually the two things that have we've picked up today, the one is the Mummy wars, which is the judgment, guilt and blame that happens between mums and other mums. And the other one is the internal guilt, which is the mum guilt, and those two are both really wasted emotions on both sides. And maybe when we talk about gentle parenting, we should be talking about that. We should be talking about, you know, don't judge somebody else's journey because you have a case study of one. And don't judge yourself because you know we are not going to always get it right.

And actually in the Parent Sense App, we've loaded up a course on good enough parenting and being a good enough mom, and actually you probably know this, that the research shows that children who come from good enough parents, in other words, parents that don't get it right all the time are much more well balanced and much more together as adults than kids where parents are trying to get it right all the time. So, you know, fail is good and repair is what comes afterwards. And that failure and repair is actually hugely important, and of course that's a whole another topic all on its own.

But we've actually run out of time, Sam and I have just loved our chat. I mean, we didn't get to any of the lovely, thorny things that we wanted to get to, but it has been a wonderful conversation and I would love to have you back and where we can maybe go through a couple of the other ones where we can look at those thorny issues around parenting that we all have to deal with.

**Sam:** A hundred percent, I'd love to be back on. Thank you so much, Meg.

**Meg:** Excellent, and thank you all for joining us and we'll see you again next week. Goodbye.

**Outro**

Thanks to everyone who joined us, we will see you the same time next week. Until then, download Parent Sense App, and take the guesswork out of parenting.