

Toddler Sleep

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What's "Normal" for a Toddler?

The amount of sleep an individual needs ranges a lot, based on temperament, physiology, and daily activity level. The quality of their sleep also varies. Some children fall asleep easily, some struggle to let go of the day. Some sleep solidly through all disturbances, others wake frequently. Some wake up happy and bright in the morning, others are sluggish. These sleep temperaments can appear at birth, and remain with the child throughout life. However, don't be too quick to "label" your child as a 'good sleeper' or a 'bad sleeper', because there are things that parents can do to improve *any* child's sleep.

As a broad, sweeping generalization, experts estimate that a "typical" one-year-old needs about 10 – 13 hours of sleep at night, and one or two naps (a total of 2 hours of nap.) A typical two-year-old needs 9.5 – 12 hours a night, and one nap (1.5 – 2.5 hours). 1/3 of toddlers still wake in the night. A three-year-old sleeps 9.5 – 12.5 hours a night, and typically no longer naps.

Sleep patterns shift during travel, around daylight savings changes, when a child is ill, or having a developmental growth spurt, is going through a separation anxiety phase, or when the family's routine changes (after a move, a new baby, new day care, change in parent's work schedule, etc.)

Things that help with sleep at any age:

- Have a fairly stable, reliable daily schedule to help set their biological clock.
- Include plenty of physical activity during the day. This will help them rest better at night.
- Spending time outside in the daylight also contributes to better night-time sleep.
- Create a consistent sleep environment. Having familiar toys, standard bedtime music, and a typical light level help reinforce that this is the "time and place for sleep."
 - Don't be too rigid... you don't want a situation where your child can only sleep when everything is perfectly in line. So do vary things a little from time to time.
- Know your child's tired cues. As they near day's end, do they get bleary-eyed, yawn and rest a lot? That's the "magic window of opportunity." If you start winding down when you see those cues, it can go well. If you miss this window, your child may get hyper and wild! It's hard to settle an overstimulated child down, so try starting earlier, *before* they get that second wind.
- Pre-empt their stall tactics. If, every night, as you send them off to bed, your child tries to delay bedtime by asking for a snack, says they're thirsty, or need to pee, make sure you've taken care of these needs before starting bedtime. Then you can be confident their needs are met, and won't fall for this attempt to stall bedtime.
- About a half hour before bedtime, start *wind-down time*: turn off screens, turn down the lights and turn down the heat (being cool signals it's time to sleep). Also turn down the activity level. (No rough-housing or big physical activity right before bed.) Change into pajamas.

Bedtime Routines

Keep it short and simple! Maybe fifteen minutes. Set clear limits on time and number of activities. Tell them the routine and stick to it: "remember, every night we read exactly two books." If kids learn that *sometimes* they can talk you into more, they'll ask for more *every* night! Some helpful tools:

- Create a visual schedule with pictures of your child doing their bedtime routine. Maybe 4 actions, like: go potty, brush teeth, bedtime stories, 3 bedtime kisses.
- Many parents use bedtime as a chance to reflect on the day: what was the best part of the day, what was the worst, what did they learn? Some parents review the day in story-style: "One spring morning, Mary woke up and had blueberries and waffles for breakfast..."
- Some parents teach relaxation and visualization techniques to help the child self-soothe.
- The standard is bedtime stories... choose calming sweet stories, and save the rollicking stories for other times of day. Some children like variety, some want the same stories every night.
- We included Bedtime Math. (There's a book or an app or make up your own math problems.)
- Then say your goodnight, and step away.

After the bedtime routine, your child may try to "escape" from bed. Don't let them, because if you let them escape once they'll try every night... Instead, every time they get up, calmly and gently pick them up, stating simply "It's now your bedtime, you need to be in bed. I will see you in the morning." And place them back in bed. No long lectures, no anger, just a matter-of-fact unbreakable rule.

Night Wake-ups

After 6 months of age, children no longer have a nutritional need for night feeds. If they are still waking, do the bare minimum intervention to help them get back to sleep. Don't make this fun time, or snuggle time – just a simple settling back to bed. Some working parents can feel guilty about lack of connection during the day and try to make up for it at night, but that's going to cause sleep issues. So keep your interaction to a minimum, with dim lights and quiet voices.

How do I know if my child has a sleep problem?

Don't listen to outsiders on this one: it doesn't matter what your friend, neighbor, or mother-in-law thinks. It matters how you feel! If it's working for you, your partner, and your child, then NO, you don't have a sleep problem. If, however, you, your partner, or your child are cranky, stressed out, sleep-deprived, frequently ill, or just tired of the situation, then take steps to fix the problem!

If you want to change things

If you're ready to make a change, such as moving your child to their own bed, changing the bedtime routine, or changing how you respond to night wakings, here are some helpful strategies.

Sleep diary. Spend a week tracking: what time does your child go down to sleep, what steps did you take to get them there, how long they slept, mood on waking, and so on. Once you have a better sense of what's *actually* happening right now, it's easier to begin figuring out what to change.

Goal Setting. Figure out what things would look like if sleep was going better. How would things be for you and your child? Having that end goal in sight can help you prioritize the steps to get there.

Make a plan. Prep your child for the change, letting them know what to expect. Writing down the new plan, or creating a picture calendar of the plan may help them. Make changes gradually.

Set your own limits for how long you'll try something... maybe you'll try for ten days straight, and if that doesn't work, you'll give up for a month, then try again. Children can't usually change behaviors in one night. They usually begin to learn a new behavior after 7-14 repetitions. But sometimes you just need to wait till they grow up a little bit more.