

Sleep

(Children 0–6 years)

Parent Easy Guide 34



Managing sleep for babies and children is one of the most common concerns for parents. Many worry about whether they are doing the right thing if their child doesn't sleep soundly all through the night.

There are many different ways parents can help babies and children to sleep, and patterns vary between cultures and families. What matters most is that bedtime is relaxed and comfortable and that babies and children have comfort when they need it and that they are safe. If things aren't working well for you, some of the following information may help.

Some facts about sleep

Types of sleep

There are two main kinds of sleep – light sleep and deep sleep. Light sleep is when we dream and 'go over' the day's events and wake feeling refreshed. It is also the kind of sleep where we wake more easily. With babies this is 80% of sleep, but by adolescence it is only about 20% of sleep.

Deep sleep is when growing and healing takes place. It is much harder to wake people from this kind of sleep.

Each night we all go through sleep cycles from light sleep to deep sleep then light again. Babies move through these two types of sleep but their cycle is shorter. Toddlers usually take about an hour for each sleep pattern or cycle.

It is between the stages of light and deep sleep that as adults we may pull up another blanket or roll over and then fade back into sleep. For babies and toddlers this may be where they cry and need help to resettle back to sleep.

How long do babies and children sleep?

Sleep is very individual and can vary a lot at any age. Children in one family may have very different sleeping needs to those in another family. Sometimes a child's sleep pattern does not match their parents' expectations.

The best way to work out how much sleep your baby or child needs is to keep a sleep diary.

Write down the times they sleep and you can get an average of the sleep they need each day.

Getting ready for sleep

Most of us have some kind of winding down time before we go to sleep. This can also help babies and children to relax and settle into sleep.

Try to make the last hour or so before bed a time for quiet, relaxing activities. Babies generally find comfort and security in a bath, a quiet story, a song and special goodnight kiss. Routines can often help parents too in organising bedtimes and so reduce tension and stress.

Settling babies

Parents need to be aware of how their baby is feeling and give them the amount of comfort they need to settle to sleep. Sometimes babies settle without any help and other times they may be 'grizzly' and need some gentle patting or rocking. If they are crying and very distressed, it is best to be with them and comfort them.

Young babies often give very small signals for what they need. Parents soon get to know their baby's signals and need to respond to them. This says to baby that they have been heard. Babies need to know you will respond to them when they cry in order to feel safe and secure. This helps their brain development and to build a close bond with you.

Babies' and young children's sleep needs change very quickly as they grow. Parents need to adapt to these changes.

Learn to know your child's cry – when it is just a settling 'grizzle', and when it is a 'real' cry that you need to attend to.

Responding to babies in this way is called 'responsive settling'. Parents are encouraged to take this approach rather than respond to babies on the basis of time, as in a 'controlled crying' approach.

Over time, parents can help babies learn to go to sleep by themselves. Put baby down when they are awake and calm, or only slightly 'grizzly'. Give them some gentle comfort and slowly withdraw. Babies will need less comfort as they learn to go to sleep by themselves.

Night waking

For many parents just knowing that night waking is 'normal' in the early years helps remove some of the stress. Each family needs to deal with night waking in the way that best suits them.

Often babies and children just need to know someone is near and they will settle back to sleep.

Sometimes night waking can be due to pain such as ear-ache, a cold or teething, so check for this if your child's behaviour is not their usual pattern. With pain, your child may not settle even if you are there to comfort, or may settle for a short time and then wake again.

It is important to meet your child's need for comfort in the way that gives you the best rest. Parents also need sleep and broken sleep can bring added stress to family life.

It is also important to ask for help and support from others, to help get you through when your sleep is reduced or broken. Support may be available from your partner, other family members, friends or community agencies.

Safe sleeping

It is important that babies are safe while they sleep. Babies may get into dangerous situations while they sleep. They can suffocate under bedding and not be able to move out of the situation.

Evidence shows there are things parents can do to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and fatal sleep accidents.

- > **Babies should always sleep on their back from birth, never on their tummy or side.**

Put baby on their back to sleep. Place baby half way down the cot with their feet almost touching the end. Make up the bedclothes so that they just come up to baby's shoulders and their head cannot go under the bedclothes. Use light bedding (not doonas, thick quilts or heavy blankets). Babies who have their heads covered, whose breathing is blocked in some way, or who become too hot, may be more likely to die suddenly.

- > **Sleep babies with their face and head uncovered (no doonas, pillows, lambs wool, bumpers or soft toys).**

Babies do not need a pillow to sleep comfortably. A safe sleeping bag can be helpful instead of blankets. Remember babies cannot get themselves into a safe position, e.g. if the

bedclothes cover their head or large toys or pets smother them. For this reason it is important not to leave your baby asleep alone in the room with a pet.

- > **Avoid exposing babies to tobacco smoke before birth and after.**

- > **Provide a safe sleeping environment night and day (safe cot, safe mattress, safe bedding).**

Choose cots, beds and bedding that meet Australian Standards (see SIDS and Kids website). Avoid clothing that has long strings, ribbons or cords (less than 10cm long if a dummy is attached to clothing).

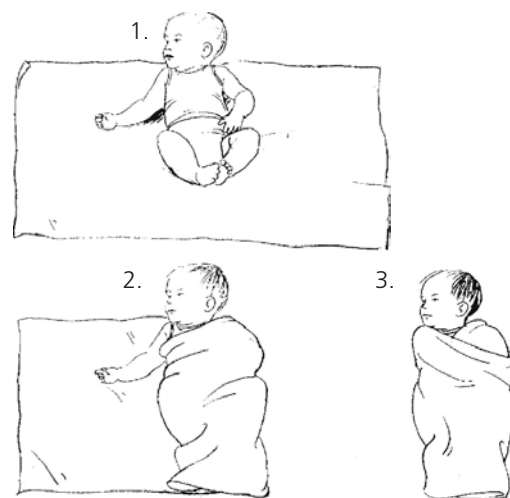
- > **Sleep baby in their own cot or bassinet next to the parent's bed for the first 6 to 12 months of life.**

Evidence shows that when babies sleep in a bed with a parent there is an increased risk of SIDS and fatal sleeping accidents. The SIDS and Kids Safe Sleep program therefore recommends that babies sleep in a cot next to their parent's bed for the first six to twelve months of life. If you are feeding, cuddling or playing with your baby in bed, remember to place them into their cot before you go to sleep. This is particularly important if you are extremely tired, a heavy sleeper, very overweight, taking medicines that make you sleep more deeply, or drinking alcohol.

It is also very dangerous to sleep on a sofa with your baby, as their head can easily become caught between the seat and back of the sofa.

Babies should sleep on their back from birth, and in a cot in their parent's room for the first 6-12 months. This helps prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and sleep accidents.

Wrapping



Some babies settle better if they are wrapped in a light sheet, while others do not. It can help young babies develop a more settled sleep pattern and older unsettled babies may sleep better.

Wrapping helps to prevent arm movements that can disturb sleep. (With older babies it is usually better to leave their arms out). Make sure that the wrapping is firm but not too tight so babies can bend their knees.

Wrap in a muslin or light cotton sheet. Do not wrap in a bunny rug or blanket, or over-dress your baby as these are not safe and can cause over-heating. The wrap should not cover your baby's face (see diagram).

Sleep at 0–3 months

How much sleep?

In the first few weeks, many babies sleep much of the day and night. They have little idea of day or night and most wake regularly around the clock every two or three hours needing a feed and attention. As a guide, many babies sleep 14–20 hours a day in the first weeks.

By three months, many babies will have settled into a pattern of longer times awake during the day, and longer sleep times (perhaps four to five hours) at night. Most babies of this age still require one or two night feeds. By three months many are settled into a pattern of longer sleep times. When a baby sleeps about five hours straight this is considered sleeping through the night.

Getting ready for sleep

- > Watch your baby's signals for when they are alert and wanting to play and when they are sleepy. It might take you some time to learn the signs that your baby is tired. Signs can include yawning, random jerky movements, crying or rubbing their eyes. After a feed, babies are often relaxed and sleepy. Some babies are awake for a short time before showing signs that they are tired and ready for sleep.
- > Even with young babies you can start a bedtime pattern. You may sing a little song, kiss goodnight, feed and bath your baby and then give a gentle kiss with some special soft words of love when you put them into bed.
- > Some young babies tend to be more wakeful in the evening or night rather than during the day. It helps your baby learn about day and night if you settle them at night in a quiet, dark place and don't play or do anything that makes them more wakeful.

Settling ideas

Put your baby on their back for sleep. Often a tired newborn will accept being put into their cot while awake and fall asleep on their own. Some new babies settle best in a quiet, dark place, others settle more easily in noisier, lighter places. Some babies are harder to settle than others and many need help to relax into sleep.

Very young babies do not always settle well in a large space – many parents use bassinets for the early weeks.

Some tips for settling your baby:

- > have some constant noise such as humming, singing a little song, relaxing music or household noise. Many babies love the vibration noise of the washing machine or dryer
- > wrap baby in a thin cotton sheet or use a safe sleeping bag that has no hood or arms
- > settle baby in the cot and pat them with a cupped hand. Start patting quickly and then slow down as they calm, usually at about the pace of your heartbeat
- > rock baby in a pram, crib or your arms for a short period and then settle them into bed (you must stay with your baby at all times if they are in a pram)
- > push baby in a pram back and forth over a bumpy surface such as the edge between your carpet and tiles or over footpath bumps
- > check that they are not too hot or cold, and that clothing is not too tight
- > a warm bath
- > a massage if your baby likes it
- > offer another feed (often called a 'top-up' feed)
- > allow baby to suck on a dummy or thumb. It is not a good idea to use a dummy before breastfeeding is working well around 4–6 weeks
- > use a baby sling so your baby is close and can hear your heart beat. This may help them settle and allow you to do a few household tasks.

Having a relaxing bed time routine helps babies and young children to relax into sleep. It is never too early to start a routine you can adapt to your child's changing needs.

Sleep at 3–6 months

How much sleep?

At this age some babies have two or three longish sleeps during the day, while others just have short naps. A few may sleep 12 hours without interruption. Some manage 8 hours, while many others wake fairly regularly for feeds. Most have learnt to sleep more at night than they do during the day.

By six months of age about 50% of babies are sleeping through the night – that is sleeping about 5 hours or more.

Getting ready for sleep

Now your baby is awake more and has some longer play times during the day. This will help your baby to learn that day is for playing and night is for sleeping. Play time may be a walk, reading a book together, a bath or massage, tummy time on the floor (always supervised) or talking with you.

Watch your baby for signs that they are tired or do not want to play any more and try to respond to them.

Continue the bedtime pattern you may have started from birth but be flexible and change your bedtime pattern to meet the changing needs of your baby.

At night keep feed times boring, do not have play time and settle your baby straight back to sleep.

Settling ideas

It is important to use the same settling pattern each time you put your baby to sleep, day or night, as this helps them to learn about sleep more quickly. Many of the suggestions made for settling babies 0–3 months can be tried, as well as:

- > reading a book with a soothing voice
- > talking calmly to baby – tell them what is happening
- > darkening the room to make a difference between wake time and sleep time
- > making a tape of household sounds and playing it in your baby's room.

Night waking

Many babies still wake at night for feeds. Some sleep through although they may wake again for a few nights when their appetite increases. They usually settle again when their feeds increase during the day.

- > To help reduce night feeds at this age, try giving your baby a sleepy feed before you go to bed and before your baby wakes for their next feed. Disturb your baby as little as possible. Lift them without fully waking them and breastfeed. If bottle feeding, you could give a feed without picking baby up from the cot. But you still must hold the bottle and watch the feed to keep them safe. The next time your baby wakes at night, try to resettle without a feed using some of the settling ideas already mentioned.
- > If resettling does not work in about 15 minutes or so offer another feed so that you can get some sleep, and try again the next night. Over time your baby will gradually get the idea.

Sleep at 6 months – 3 years

How much sleep?

Some babies and toddlers can sleep through the night. Some toddlers are the 'sleepy owls' who need more sleep, while others are the 'larks' and get by with much less sleep and this is OK. Many still wake once or twice, or several times at night. Between the ages of 2–3 years 41% of young children wake once or twice a night, with a few still waking more often. During sleep they may, as most adults do, turn over and go back to sleep, or they may cry because they are uncomfortable, or afraid or want to know you are there.

Getting ready for sleep

- > During the day try regular mealtimes with some snacks and one or two sleeps.
- > Encourage plenty of activity when your child is awake. Visit the park or playground, have some outside activity or go for a walk if the weather is fine.
- > As before, make the last hour or so before sleep a relaxing, not exciting time.

Settling ideas

- > Keep to the regular settling pattern that you have established, such as a bath, quiet play, story, cuddles and/or song.
- > You can put your child into the cot awake. This will help them go to sleep there.
- > You might sing a little song or put on some relaxing music.
- > Patting and rocking may still work at this age – a chair by the side of the cot or bed may be most restful for you. Some babies and toddlers may get used to this and cry as soon as you stop, so change the timing of the patting, slow it down and become softer, finally resting your hand on their body.
- > Some will still feel more secure if they are wrapped in a thin cotton sheet or sleeping bag, others may not like it.

Settling older toddlers

- > Try leaving a soft light on, giving a cuddly toy, giving them something of yours to cuddle, e.g. an old T-shirt that has 'your smell' on it. Many still like their dummy at bedtime. If they lose it in the night try putting several in the cot and if the child wakes move their hand to a dummy so they get the idea of finding it.
- > Some children need you to stay near while they go to sleep. If you decide to do this, don't sneak out without telling your child. This may keep them tense and on edge in case you do it again. You can whisper that you are going to another room and will be back soon. Make sure you do return soon. If your child copes with this you can start taking a bit longer before coming back, but make sure you always return before they get upset as this builds trust. Even if they have fallen asleep give them a goodnight kiss and whisper 'I came back'.
- > When your child settles to bed, but needs you nearby this could become your relaxation time. Take a book to read or a CD and sit in a comfortable chair near your child. You are present but not doing anything that might disturb them. Over a few nights you could gradually move your chair nearer to the door. Eventually you will be able to put it outside the door so your child can hear you but not see you. This way your child gradually learns to settle when you are not there.

Night waking

Many children of this age wake at night and will grow out of it in time. If you and your child are happy with the way things are, do not feel pressured to change.

Your child may wake and cry at night due to:

- > being in a light phase of sleep so that something like a noise causes them to wake fully
- > separation anxiety. This is a very common reason for children under three years to cry at night. You can tell if your child is waking due to separation anxiety because if you are nearby to reassure them, they will settle back to sleep. By eight or nine months of age, babies have learned that their parents exist even if they can't see them and they often get frightened when they wake and their parents aren't there
- > not knowing how to settle back to sleep. Sometimes young children need to be fed, rocked or nursed to sleep and find it hard to settle back to sleep when they are in their own bed
- > pain such as ear-ache, a cold, or teething.

What parents can do

- > Put a day bed or mattress in your child's room and lie down near them so you both get to sleep.
- > Put their bed in your room near you.
- > Make sure they get plenty to eat during the day.

Sleep at 3–6 years

How much sleep?

Many children of this age need about 10–12 hours sleep at night. Bedtime may vary a lot. Some may go to bed at 6.30pm, while many go to bed later. Wake-up time may be early or late and those who go to bed later tend to wake later.

Young children may still need a daytime sleep as well. By kindergarten age only a few still have a daytime nap.

Getting ready for sleep

- > To help 3–6 year olds prepare for the idea of going to bed familiar night time activities will help.
- > Work out a night time pattern around what is special for you and your child. A typical pattern may include a bath, drink, teeth cleaning, cuddle, story, prayer or song and kiss 'goodnight'. It might be a quiet time to sit on the bed and talk about the events of the day.
- > It is helpful to let children know in advance that bedtime is coming, e.g. 'just one more game and then it's time to get ready for bed' – and mean what you say. This can prevent the pestering for more time to stay up.
- > The half-hour before bed is not a good time for tickles, wrestles, quarrels, TV or other excitement.

Settling ideas

- > If you have a night time pattern it will help to settle your child but stressful events of the day can sometimes mean that extra time and quiet attention is needed, e.g. starting school, being unwell, family disruptions.
- > Reassuring words, a longer cuddle or relaxing music can help.
- > It is at these moments that older children may talk about things that are bothering them.

Night waking

Night waking is common in these years and there is no 'right way' to solve night waking. Sometimes doing whatever works for you as a family is good enough. Some children can resettle themselves – others may need comforting.

The inner confidence to feel secure when parents are not present is still developing by three to four years of age. If night waking is being caused by separation anxiety, it usually improves after four years of age.

At times when children are sick, lonely, sad or frightened they need help to go back to sleep.

The changes in your child's life, e.g. moving house, separations, and family tensions or starting preschool can be a factor.

Children usually grow out of night waking by the time they are three or four, and they feel more secure being by themselves.

What parents can do

- > Try settling your child where they will be sleeping the night, so you don't have to move them.
- > During the night when they wake, go to them and quietly reassure him that everything is all right. Say something like 'Sleep time now – Mummy and Daddy love you', then walk out of the room. If your child remains unsettled you may need to try some of the ideas below.
- > If your child comes into your room when they wake, you could try to lead them back to bed, and resettle them there.
- > Sometimes putting a spare bed in your child's room so that you can be comfortable and can rest while your child needs you close is an option.
- > Some parents find that everyone gets a better night's sleep if they allow the child to come into their own bed during the early hours of the morning – or they have a small mattress and sleeping bag next to their bed that their child can get into if they wake.
- > Night-time waking is for comforting and resettling, not for getting out of bed for play or anything else exciting. Be comforting but boring. Don't respond to any games.

- > Ask your child what would help them go to sleep. Some children can tell you, others may not be able to.
- > Think about the changes happening in your child's life that can cause stress. They may seem minor to an adult, but can be major in the eyes of a child.

As children grow older and become more secure they will not need to be so close to you. Most children no longer need to share their parents' bed or bedroom by the time they are four or five years old, unless something stressful is happening in their lives. Many children still love to come into their parents' bed for a snuggle early in the mornings.

Going to bed problems

Sometimes parents find it is hard to get young children to go to bed or their early waking causes problems – and there are many different reasons for this. In some cultures children sleep in or near the action, and can nap whenever they feel tired – this is not a problem. However parents are often tired at the end of the day and need time to themselves, or need extra sleep in the morning – more than their child does.

Some of the reasons a child may not want to go to bed may be:

- > having to go off on their own and leave people or interesting things that are happening in the house
- > being frightened of being left alone. No matter what time you put your child to bed, with fear or worry they will still be unhappy
- > not being tired yet - probably will go to bed happily but later
- > a very busy or exciting day, or too much excitement just before bed
- > being affected by daylight saving
- > lack of a night-time routine to help them wind down.

Note: children usually wake when they have had enough sleep so early waking may be because of early bedtime.

Looking after yourself

Caring for babies and young children is tiring and demands a great deal of tolerance, understanding and patience. Most parents say that their need for sleep in the early years is one of their greatest needs. Don't be ashamed to ask for help from family and friends. If you feel that you might hurt your child make sure they are in a safe place and leave until you have calmed down. Contact someone immediately if you feel unable to manage.

Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

Advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service

Phone 1300 733 606 9am–4.30pm

Mon–Fri for an appointment

Kidsafe SA

Phone 8161 6318

www.kidsafesa.com.au

Information and products on child safety.

SIDS and Kids

Phone 8369 0155

www.sidsandkids.org

Information about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and safe sleeping

Child and Youth Health

www.cyh.com

Child health and parenting information.

'Sleep and settling' publication.

Parenting SA

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

For more Parent Easy Guides, e.g. 'Sleep disturbance' 'About babies', 'Bedwetting', 'Living with toddlers', and for parent groups in your area

Parenting SA
Women's and Children's Health Network
Telephone (08) 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

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Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia

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