

Sleep (0–6 years)

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Sleep for babies and children can be a concern for parents. They wonder whether they are doing the right thing if their child does not sleep all through the night.

It can help to know that night waking is normal in the early years. What matters most is that babies and children have the comforting they need, and bedtimes are calm and relaxed. If things aren't working as well as you would like, the following information may help.



Sleep cycles

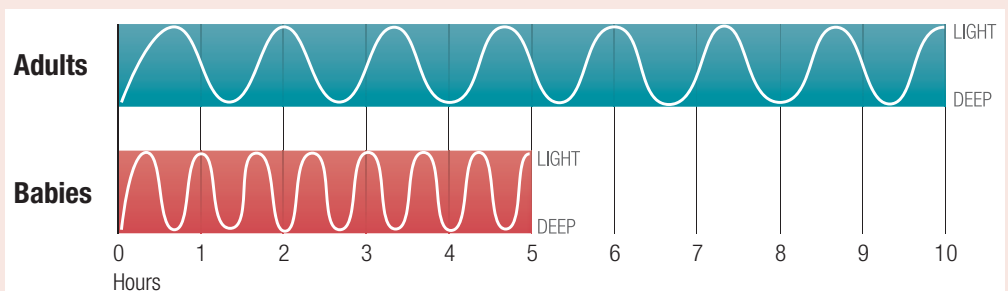
There are two main kinds of sleep — light sleep and deep sleep. Light sleep is when we dream and 'go over' the day's events. It is the kind of sleep where we wake more easily. Deep sleep is when growing and healing takes place. It is much harder to wake from this kind of sleep.

Each night we all go through cycles from light sleep to deep sleep then light again. Babies have short sleep cycles of about

30–50 minutes. Toddlers have cycles of about an hour, and these get longer as they get older.

Between light sleep and deep sleep adults may pull up a blanket or roll over and fade back into sleep.

For babies and toddlers this may be when they wake and cry. They may need a feed or your help to resetttle back to sleep.



Getting ready for sleep

Most of us have some kind of relaxing, wind-down time before we go to sleep at night. A quiet, wind-down time can also help babies and children to sleep. You could:

- make the hour or so before bed a time for a bath, quiet story, song and goodnight kiss
- start a pattern from an early age. This can help babies learn that these things mean sleep.

A pattern of predictable, relaxing bedtime activities can help babies, children and the whole family sleep better.

Safe sleeping

Babies need to be safe while they sleep. They can get into dangerous situations and not be able to move out of them. They can suffocate if bedding or other items cover their head or face.

Some ways to reduce the risk of fatal sleep accidents and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) are to:

- Sleep baby on their back from birth, never on their tummy or side
- Keep baby's head and face uncovered — no beanie, hat or hood
- Keep baby smoke free, before and after birth
- Provide a safe sleeping place night and day:
 - use a cot (or portable cot) that meets current Australian standards. Make sure the mattress is firm, clean, flat and fits the cot well
 - keep the cot away from curtain or blind cords and other hazards
 - do not use pillows, quilts, doonas or cot bumpers. Keep the cot free of soft toys and other soft items as these are a suffocation risk
 - do not sleep baby on soft surfaces such as sofas, bean bags, pillows or lambswools, either alone or with another person. There is a high risk of their airway being blocked by soft surfaces or their head becoming wedged into cushions or the back of a sofa. There is a very high risk to babies if they are on a sofa or couch with an adult, and the adult falls asleep
 - do not sleep baby in products that are not flat or not designed for sleep, e.g. car seats, capsules, bouncers.

If baby falls asleep in one of these, move them to a safe sleeping place as soon as possible

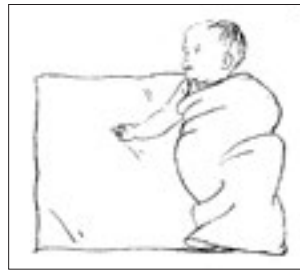
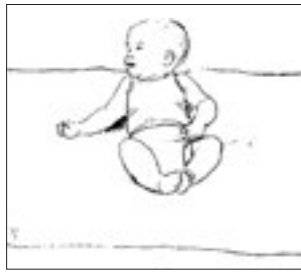
- sleep babies with their feet almost touching the end of the cot. Tuck bedclothes in securely so they just come up to baby's shoulders and their head cannot go under
- do not use a pillow under 2 years of age
- avoid clothing that has long strings, ribbons or cords as these are a strangulation or choking risk
- if using a baby sleeping bag, make sure it is the correct size, with fitted neck, arm holes and no hood. It should provide warmth without overheating baby. Dress baby lightly underneath
- Sleep baby in their own cot (or bassinet in the early months) next to your bed for the first 6 to 12 months
 - this makes it easier for you to respond to baby's needs
 - if you are feeding, cuddling or playing with baby in your bed, it is very important to place them into their cot before you go to sleep. This is particularly important if you are very tired, a heavy sleeper, obese, taking medicines that make you sleep more deeply, or drinking alcohol
- Breastfeed baby
 - breastfeeding is a known protective factor for safe sleeping, so if you can, it's best to breastfeed your baby. If you have any questions or concerns about breastfeeding, support is available. See services at the end of this guide.

If someone else is looking after your baby, make sure they know about safe sleeping.

Wrapping

Some young babies settle better if they are wrapped. They feel more secure and it prevents sudden arm movements (reflexes) that can disturb sleep. Not all babies like to be wrapped so follow your baby's cues.

- Use a muslin or light cotton fabric.
- Do not wrap in a bunny rug or blanket as these can overheat your baby and are not safe. Dress baby lightly under the wrap.



- Bring one edge of the wrap over either both arms or one arm and tuck under your baby.
- Make it firm but not so tight that it restricts breathing or leg movement.
- It is important for hip development that baby's legs can bend up and out to the sides, and that their legs are not wrapped into the straight position.
- Wrap baby below the neck to avoid their face and head being covered by the wrap.
- Stop wrapping when your baby shows signs they are trying to roll during play. This is usually at around 4–6 months. You can also stop wrapping when your baby doesn't seem to need it for sleeping any more. A safe sleeping bag that allows baby's arms to be out is a good option.

Babies 0–12 months

All babies are different. They have their own individual sleep needs at every age, and these can change quickly.

From birth, babies need interaction with you while they are awake and alert.

Looking into their eyes, talking, singing and playing builds your bond and can help them to sleep better.

In the early weeks

Babies usually sleep 14–20 hours in a 24 hour period. They have little idea of day or night and most wake every 2–3 hours around the clock needing something such as a feed, nappy change or cuddle.

3–6 months

By 3 months, many babies have settled into a pattern of longer times awake during the day and longer sleeps at night, perhaps around 4 hours.

Most babies of this age wake at least two or three times at night, and need one or two night feeds.

By 6 months, around half of babies are sleeping through the night, that is, sleeping 5 hours or more.

6–12 months

Most babies of this age sleep 11–16 hours in a 24 hour period. Many have learned to sleep more at night than during the day. They may still wake once or twice at night for feeds. Some babies have two or three longish sleeps during the day, while others have short naps of 40 minutes or so.

At this age babies are learning new and exciting things such as rolling or crawling. They may feel pain from teething at times. All of these can affect sleep.

As babies get older their appetite usually increases. They may wake more for a few nights and settle again with increased feeds during the day.

Night waking

It is normal for babies to wake at night. They can lie quietly for a while and go back to sleep, or cry because they need something. They might need a feed, a nappy change, be too hot or cold, unwell or need comfort from you. Sometimes babies and young children just need to know someone is near to settle back to sleep.

If your baby uses a dummy, you could put several in the cot and when they wake they can learn to find them.

Separation anxiety

By about 6 months babies often feel frightened when they wake and you are not there. This is called 'separation anxiety' and is part of normal emotional development. It can be a reason children cry at night until around 3 or 4 years of age. Children will settle more quickly if you are there to reassure them.

Pain or illness

Night waking which is different to your child's usual pattern may be due to pain such as ear-ache, a cold or teething. With pain, babies may not settle even if you comfort them, or they may settle for a short time and then wake again. If this is happening seek medical advice.

Night waking is normal in the early years. Each family needs to manage night waking in a way that works best for them. It is important to meet your child's need for comfort, and to get the best rest you can.



Tired signs

Babies communicate from birth and each has their own way of showing they are tired. If you watch and notice, you can come to know your baby's tired signs. Some may be obvious but others may be harder to see. Signs can include:

- crying, grizzling
- random jerky movements
- frowning, pulling faces
- yawning
- rubbing eyes
- not smiling, looking away.

It works best to settle baby when they show signs of being tired. If they become too tired and upset it will be harder for them to settle.

Day and night

From about 3 or 4 months babies develop sleep cycles related to the release of the sleep hormone, melatonin.

You can help babies develop day and night patterns by making a difference between day and night.

During the day:

- play with baby when they are alert and not tired
- spend time in bright daylight. This suppresses melatonin.

At night:

- avoid bright light, TV and other screens
- settle baby in a quiet, darker place and don't play or do anything that makes them more wakeful
- if baby wakes at night for a feed, keep these calm and quiet and settle them straight back to sleep.



Settling babies

Each baby has their own preferences when settling to sleep. Some settle better when it is quiet, while others prefer some noise or music. They might like being held a certain way, either firmly or lightly, or movements such as swaying or rocking. Some babies enjoy a massage while others don't like it. As time goes on you can get to know what your baby likes and what helps them settle. They are learning the skill of going to sleep and need your help to do this.

- The most important thing is to be sensitive to your baby and provide the comforting they need. A distressed baby will need more comforting, and as they settle you can gradually reduce what you do. This is called 'responsive settling'. When you respond to baby's needs you are helping them learn to feel safe and secure, which is important for their emotional development.
- When babies are comforted it helps them practice becoming calm. In time they can learn to calm themselves, and will usually cry and fuss less in the long run.

Some settling ideas include:

- giving baby a warm, relaxing bath
- giving a massage if your baby likes it
- wrapping a young baby in a muslin or thin cotton sheet, or using a safe baby sleeping bag (see Wrapping section)
- holding baby and rocking, patting or swaying gently
- saying soothing soft words, sounds such as 'shhh' or singing soft songs
- some low, constant noise such as humming, household noise, quiet music or white noise from the radio
- making the room very quiet and/or dark
- letting baby suck on a dummy or their thumb. It is best to avoid a dummy until breastfeeding is working well, usually at around 4–6 weeks
- sharing a book or story, if this relaxes baby. Some babies can be unsettled in the evening. It can help to plan ahead so you have time to spend with them, e.g. prepare your evening meal earlier in the day.

It is not recommended to leave a baby to cry in distress.

Learning to sleep

You can help baby begin to learn to go to sleep on their own.

- Put baby into their cot when they are awake but sleepy and calm. You could start patting them quickly and firmly, then slow down as they settle. Finally rest your hand on their body or slowly pat the mattress. Try some gentle words of comfort, singing or humming.
- If they are upset, stay with them and comfort them. Repeat the settling strategies that your baby likes. Slowly withdraw as baby settles.
- If baby wakes up during the night, wait a short while and listen before going to them. They may resettle without your help. If they don't resettle, go to them and comfort them before they become distressed.

There are many different ways to settle babies for sleep. If you are happy with the way things are going for your baby and you, there is no need to change.

Toddlers 1–3 years

Night waking

There is a wide variation in the amount of time toddlers sleep. Some sleep through the night. Many still wake once or twice, and some wake more often. Most toddlers have at least one sleep during the day, usually after lunch.

When toddlers wake at night they may cry because they:

- are in the habit of crying and have not yet learned to resettle themselves
- are in a light phase of sleep and wake up
- are afraid or want to know you are there (separation anxiety)
- feel unwell or are in pain. This could be the cause if waking is not their usual pattern.

If they wake, you could wait a short while to give them a chance to resettle themselves. If they become upset go to them and help them resettle.

Getting ready for sleep

- Continue the settling pattern that works for your toddler, e.g. a warm bath, quiet book, stories, songs or music.
- Have regular bedtimes and wake times, both on week days and the weekend.
- During the day spend time with your toddler and give them your attention. Encourage active play and plenty of natural outdoor light. Have quieter play in the evenings.
- Have regular mealtimes with some snacks and one or two sleeps.

Talk with your toddler to prepare them for going to bed. Talk about what they are doing and what will happen next, e.g. having a bath, putting on pyjamas, cleaning teeth, reading a story, going to sleep. This reinforces the predictable bedtime pattern.



- Stop watching TV or other screens one hour before bed. The 'blue light' from screens suppresses production of the hormone melatonin that assists sleep. Avoid scary programs or exciting games.
- Leave a soft light on if your toddler likes this.
- Many still like their dummy at bedtime.
- don't sneak out without telling them. They may stay tense in case you do it again, and won't be able to relax for sleep. Whisper that you are going to another room and will be back soon. Make sure you do return soon as this builds trust. If your child copes with this you can take a bit longer before coming back next time
- sit on a chair near your child and read a book or listen to music through headphones. 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, and eventually you will be able to put it outside the room.

Settling toddlers

Patting and rocking may still work at this age. A chair by the cot or bed may be most restful for you.

If your child stands up in their cot, sit on the floor or a low chair and be at their eye level. This can encourage them to lie down. Pat them, look at them and talk gently.

Some children need you to stay near while they go to sleep. If you do this:

You could also try giving them something of yours to cuddle, e.g. an old t-shirt that has your smell on it, or a cuddly toy if they are over 1 year old.

Moving from a cot to a bed

If your toddler is happy and safe in their cot there is no need to move to a bed. If it looks like they might climb out of their cot, it's time to move to a low bed or firm mattress on the floor.

Remember your child can now access their bedroom and other areas of the house. Keep children safe from hazards such as poisons, electrical or drowning risks, outside doors or windows that can be opened, or furniture or TVs that can topple over. Put barriers near stairs, heaters and other hazards that can't be removed.

If you are using your child's cot for a new baby, make the change well before the baby arrives so your child does not feel the baby has taken their cot.

Children 3–6 years

How much sleep?

Many children of this age need 10 to 12 hours sleep at night. Some have a daytime sleep as well, but only a few children still need this by preschool age.

Night waking

Night waking is common in these years and there is no right way to solve it. Some children can resettle themselves, while others need more comforting.

The inner confidence to feel secure when parents are not there is still developing in 3–4 year olds. If night waking is caused by separation anxiety, it usually happens less after 4 years of age.

Changes in your child's life that may be causing stress, e.g. moving house, separations, family tension or starting preschool can be factors in night waking. Things that seem minor to you can be major to a child. When children are sick, lonely, sad or frightened they may need more help to sleep. Staying close to them, e.g. on a mattress in their room, can help them move through the concern more quickly.

Children can also wake due to sleep disturbances such as nightmares or night terrors (see ParentLink Guide 'Sleep disturbance'), or other problems such as snoring. Talk to your doctor if these are happening.

Getting ready for sleep

- Talk to children to prepare them for going to bed. Let them 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 them pressuring you to stay up.
- Work out a pattern of what is special for you and your child. It may be a bath, drink, teeth cleaning, cuddle, story, song and kiss goodnight. It might be a quiet time to sit on the bed and talk about the day. This is not a time for tickles, wrestles, quarrels, TV or other excitement.
- Stressful events can sometimes mean children need extra time and quiet attention, e.g. starting school, being unwell, family disruptions. Reassuring words, a longer cuddle or relaxing music can help. Older children may talk to you about what's bothering them.
- Leave a night light on if your child likes this.
- Let them have a favourite toy, as long as it is safe.

Settling ideas

- If your child gets out of bed, gently lead them back and resettle them in their bed.

- If they wake at night, go to them, comfort and resettle them. It is not time to play or do anything exciting. Quietly reassure them that everything is OK. Say something like 'Sleep time now, I love you', then walk out of the room. You may need to return and repeat this.
- You could put another bed for yourself in your child's room. You can be comfortable and rest while they need you close.
- Some parents allow their child to come into their bed in the early hours of the morning. If this happens, one parent may be willing to sleep in another room or the child's bed, so everyone gets better sleep. Try a small mattress and sleeping bag or blanket next to your bed for your child to use if they wake and come into your room.

Ask your child what would help them sleep. Some children can tell you, others may not be able to.

Issues at bedtime

Some reasons a child may not want to go to bed are:

- 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. Whatever time you put them to bed, with fear or worry they will still be unhappy
- not being tired yet. They may go to bed more happily later
- a very busy or exciting day, or too much excitement just before bed
- no night-time routine to help them wind down.

In some cultures children sleep in or near the action, and can nap whenever they feel tired. This is not a problem if there is a safe place for them to sleep, such as a mattress on the floor.

Sleep



Getting support

If things are not working as well as you would like, or you feel upset or worried, do not hesitate to seek help and support. Contact a service in this Guide or talk to your doctor. You could ask friends or family for support. They might be able to look after your child for a short while so you can rest.

Children's sleep can be challenging at times. If you feel upset or angry, make sure your child is safe and take a short break. You could go outside or contact a friend.

Remember, never shake a baby. It can cause brain damage and some children die.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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