

Sleep and Children: What's Normal?

Children who get enough sleep are less likely to be moody or have behavior problems. They often develop better memory, concentration, and longer attention spans. With plenty of sleep, they may also recover from illness faster.

While children may seem anything but sleepy at bedtime, they still may be. Their bouncing around the room behavior may be masking sleep deprivation. How much is enough sleep? Sleep patterns vary, based on the age of the child.

What are normal sleep patterns?

Infants (up to 1 year of age):

- Newborns sleep about 16 hours per day. The average is about 16 hours divided into 3 or 4 hour naps between feedings. They may not have regular times for napping.
- By the first birthday, infants usually sleep 13 to 14 hours per day. However, about 1 in 5 infants still do not sleep through the night (meaning at least 6 hours without waking) by the first birthday.
- A good portion of infant's sleep is active sleep in which they make facial movements and make small movements.

Toddlers (ages 1 to 2):

- Children in this age range sleep 11 to 13 hours per day.
- They often need a morning nap and an afternoon nap.
- Toddlers often feel scared of going to sleep or waking up in the dark. Bedtime rituals (regular bedtimes, baths, quiet activity, bedtime reading, a favorite stuffed animal or blanket) may help relax the toddler.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

- Preschoolers usually sleep 10 to 12 hours per day, including one midday nap of 1 to 2 hours and nighttime sleep.
- Even if they stop napping, children this age may be less fussy in the evening if they have a quiet time for rest in the afternoon.
- Even after being toilet trained, many children (especially boys) continue to wet the bed at night. For bedwetters, withholding water for 2 to 3 hours before bedtime may help stop wetting if the child has plenty to drink earlier in the day. Waking your child to go to the bathroom before you go to bed may help to stop bedwetting.
- Preschoolers often have nightmares once or twice per week about being abandoned or about scary animals or monsters. This is most likely to happen after active days, going to bed late, or watching a scary movie. Mild comforting and a night light helps them overcome their fears.

Many children up through the middle elementary school years ask to sleep with their parents. If this occurs only once in a while it may not be a problem. Sleeping with parents is not harmful if the parents are comfortable with this. However, most American parents are not comfortable with it. In American culture sleeping with parents does not encourage the independence expected of children. Also sleeping with parents may lower self-esteem as the child realizes other children their age sleep alone. For children age 2 and older it is usually best to calmly insist that they sleep in their own bed. They may cry or fuss for several nights before being OK with this. Be concerned about their distress, but do not give in by letting them into your bed.

School-aged children (ages 6 to 12)

- Elementary school age children commonly take 15 to 30 minutes after lying down quietly before they are asleep. They usually sleep 9 to 11 hours per night
- Nightmares a few times per month are common and often include scary things from real life or movies. Common fears at night are darkness, strange noises, intruders, or imagined ideas.
- Until age 7 or 8, many children, especially boys continue to wet the bed.

Adolescents (ages 13 to 17)

- Teens often continue to need 9 to 10 hours of sleep per night, but many do well with 8 hours.
- Teenagers get sleepy later than preteens and often have trouble falling asleep. They may not fall asleep for 20 to 30 minutes after lying quiet in bed. They often complain of being tired after school, and like to sleep-in on the weekends. Puberty brings changes to their sleep-wake cycle. Many teens feel like staying up late and waking up late and then trying to catch up with sleep on the weekends. If they do this, they will be constantly sleep deprived. Lack of sleep can cause moodiness as well as problems with attention and memory. It also puts them at risk for falling asleep while driving.

What can I do to help my child?

Some children may seem anything but sleepy at bedtime. However, their "bouncing around the room" behavior may actually be caused by lack of sleep. To help your child sleep:

- Regular exercise and time outside in the sunlight every day, helps keep the body's internal clock on track.
- Whether you have young child or a teenager, plan a quiet time of at least half an hour before bedtime. This means no TV, computer and phone for 30 minutes before bed.
- Set a bedtime and stick to it. Changing bedtimes can cause problems such as trouble getting to sleep and waking up in the morning.
- For preschool and elementary school children, have a predictable pre-bedtime routine such as a bath and reading time. Do not put your child to sleep by allowing them to watch TV or movies.

- Start the bedtime routine early enough so that you can tuck in your child and talk to him or her. Children often like to have this "private" time to talk to their parents and you need to plan for this time so it does not take time away from sleep time.
- Accept that your child may lie in bed up to 30 minutes before falling asleep. Do not tell your child to "go to sleep" since telling them this often increases how long it takes to fall asleep.
- Help children feel more secure by allowing them to have a night light or a special toy in bed with them.
- If your child gets up or calls out after going to bed, stay calm and limit how much attention you give your child. Do not get angry with them since this often makes the problem worse.
- If your child has a nightmare, calmly reassure them that the dream is not real. Help them understand that everyone has bad dreams sometimes. Talk with your child during the daytime about nightmares they have had. Reassure children that they are OK and it was just a dream.
- Do not let your child have drinks with caffeine, such as a cola for 5 hours before bedtime.

Every child is different and some need more sleep than others. If your child seems tired during the day, moody, or "hyper," he or she may not be getting enough sleep.

Most sleep problems with children can be corrected by adjustments to the child's bedtime routine or parent expectations of what is "normal" for their child. Some sleep problems, however, are true disorders which need special attention, and sometimes treatment by a healthcare professional.

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