

# Helping your child sleep well

A good night's sleep can make a big difference in your child's day (and yours). Sleep is thought to be important for learning, growth, healing, and proper function of the immune system. Children who don't sleep well may be irritable, less successful in school, and more likely to have an accident. And if one person in the family isn't sleeping, the rest of the family may be kept awake by the problem. Fortunately, certain simple things you can do are the keys to good sleep.

## What to expect

Newborns sleep 14 to 16 hours a day, spread evenly through the day and night. After about six weeks, babies begin to sleep more during the night than the day. While they sleep, you may see sucking movements, facial twitches, or stretching. By age 4 to 6 months, many infants sleep through the night.

From 6 months to adulthood, sleepers occasionally have partial awakenings during the night—they may stir, open their eyes, and even cry. They will fall asleep again if they recognize a familiar environment and are not disturbed.

Toddlers generally need 11 to 13 hours of sleep a day, including a daily nap until they are 3 to 5 years old. School-age children should get 10 to 11 hours of daily sleep. Adolescents need eight to nine hours of sleep; they frequently get less than this amount.

## Basic tips for improving sleep

-  Follow a consistent schedule for bedtime and awakening.
-  Never use your child's bed as a place of punishment.
-  Discourage daytime play in the bed.
-  Schedule naps, if needed, early in the day (before 2 p.m.).
-  Limit caffeine, especially after noon.
-  Turn the television off at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
-  Avoid meals and exercise near bedtime.

- 📌 Have your child empty his (or her) bladder just before going to bed.
- 📌 Establish a calming bedtime routine; bedtime stories are perfect.
- 📌 Make sure the sleeping environment is quiet, dark, and not too hot or cold.
- 📌 Put infants to sleep on their backs.
- 📌 Put your child in bed while he is still awake, so he gets used to falling asleep there.
- 📌 Don't reward your child for leaving bed—TV, play, and long conversations with you should not be allowed.
- 📌 If your child gets out of bed, calmly and immediately lead him back to bed.
- 📌 Stickers or other rewards given for staying in bed may be useful if your child keeps getting out of bed.

### **Common problems:**

**Nightmares** usually occur late in the night, and they may awaken the child. He will remember having had a frightening dream. Reassure him that he is safe and can continue to sleep in his bed. Nightmares can be triggered by daytime events and fears. Television shows, movies, video games, and books should be screened by you for material that may be too frightening for your child.

**Sleep terrors** occur earlier in the night than nightmares do. Children may scream, open their eyes, sit up, or thrash about in bed—but they are not truly awake. They are unable to be comforted, but after 10 minutes or so they return to a calm sleep. They do not remember having a scary dream or even that anything happened. These episodes resolve on their own as the child reaches adolescence.

**Sleepwalking** can be dangerous, because sleepwalkers are able to do complicated tasks without any conscious awareness. Risks of sleepwalking include walking through glass, falling down stairs, and wandering into traffic or bad weather. You don't need to try to awaken a sleepwalker; just lead him back to bed. Most importantly, make sure he cannot get to stairways, streets, or other hazardous areas.

**Resources:** If you want to know more about sleep in children, here are a few books:

“Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems”, by Richard Ferber

“Sleeping Through the Night: How Infants, Toddlers, and Their Parents Can Get a Good Night's Sleep”, by Jodi A. Mindell

“American Academy of Pediatrics Guide to Your Child's Sleep: Birth Through Adolescence”, edited by George J. Cohen