



# Bedtime, child's sleep

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**TODDLERHOOD**

**ARTICLE**

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Naps are essential for your toddler's good health until the age of 4 years. This article describes the importance of napping and how napping also sets the stage for good overall sleep.

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## How much sleep does my toddler need?

### Do toddlers really need naps?

Yes. Naps are essential for your toddler's good health until the age of 4 years. Research suggests that naps are crucial to a child's brain development. Without them, a child's physical and mental development can suffer.

Napping also sets the stage for good overall sleep because it ensures that your child is not overtired. (Overtired children have a harder time falling asleep.)

Experts suggest that eating and sleeping should be the two highest priorities in a toddler's life.

## **How can I encourage my toddler to be a good napper?**

Here are some tips:

- Put your child down for a nap during a period when he is apt to be sleepy. Most toddlers are naturally drowsy between 12 and 2 p.m.
- Watch for clues that your toddler is sleepy. If a child becomes overtired, it will be harder for him to fall asleep. If your toddler becomes less alert, quiet, or rubs his eyes, put him to bed.
- Don't let your toddler take his naps in the stroller or the car. While the motion may lull him to sleep, the sleep is not likely to be as long or as restful. His own crib or bed is the best place for napping.
- Respect the naptime schedule. While it may be tempting to push back naptime because you have errands to do, it's not fair to your child, who will likely be drowsy at his normal naptime. Work your plans around his naptime.

## **At what age do most toddlers give up their morning naps?**

By 18 months of age, most toddlers can make do with only an afternoon nap. If it's taking longer to get him to fall asleep for his morning nap or that nap has become much shorter, it may be a sign that he's ready to move to a one-nap-a-day schedule.

## **My 3-year-old really fights taking a nap? Does he still need one?**

Probably yes. In most cases, a three-year-old still has a biological need for a nap. Just because he doesn't seem to want a nap doesn't mean that he doesn't need one.

Use your judgment. If your child is irritable and appears overtired, he probably still needs a nap. See our tips for getting your toddler to go to sleep.

If your 3-year-old seems to be able to make do without a nap, he may still benefit from a quiet rest period in the afternoon, as well as an earlier bedtime.

## **How can I get my toddler to go to sleep more easily?**

As you may well know, few toddlers look forward to going to sleep. They're too afraid that they'll miss something. But it does neither him nor you any good to give into his demands to put off bedtime.

Here are some tips to make it easier:

- Set regular naptimes and bedtimes, and then keep to the schedule. While it may be less convenient to always be home at these times, experienced parents say the payoff is great—it is a lot easier to get toddlers to go to sleep if they and their bodies are used to sleeping at the same times each day.
- Set the stage by helping your toddler wind down at the end of the day. Choose quiet activities for the period just before bedtime.
- Create a consistent bedtime ritual. It may include a bath, story, or kissing his teddy bear good night. It should conclude with him quiet, but awake, in his crib. Toddlers will benefit from learning to fall asleep on their own if they have not already acquired this skill.
- Let your child choose a stuffed animal to be a "nap buddy." Put a night-light in the room.
- Do not stay with your child while he falls asleep. This habit may make him more likely to wake in the middle of the night.
- If your child cries when you leave, give him at least 10 minutes to stop on his own. Then go in to try to settle him down again. If he cries again when you leave, repeat this same routine. While you shouldn't scold or punish him for this behaviour, you also shouldn't reward it by feeding him or staying with him.
- Remain calm and consistent. Your confidence in his ability to fall asleep on his own will ultimately help your child to learn that sleep is a good thing.

## **What can I do to get my toddler to stop waking up in the middle of the night?**

Keep in mind that waking in the middle of the night is normal—even adults briefly "wake up" 3 or 4 times during the night. The trick is teaching your toddler to fall back to sleep on his own.

If your toddler has become used to getting night time attention from you, it may take a bit of retraining.

See our tips for getting your toddler back to sleep.

## **What should I do if my toddler wakes up in the middle of the night?**

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you try to get your toddler back to dreamland:

- Before you go into the room, be sure that your child is really awake. Toddlers can be noisy sleepers. Some may whimper, but only be half awake. Enter the room only after sustained crying.
- Although you can show some compassion, be firm. Remember, you are helping both him and yourself if you teach him how to successfully get back to sleep on

his own.

- Keep the room as dark and your interaction with him as brief as possible.
- Check to see if he has lost his favourite cuddly toy or gotten tangled in his blanket.
- Don't give milk, water, or any other liquid to help him fall back to sleep. Your child doesn't need nourishment during the night, and overnight feeding at this age can cause tooth decay.
- Unless you think he might be sick, try, if at all possible, to not pick him up—you can rub his back or simply soothe him with your voice. Stay with him only until he's calm—not until he's asleep.
- Don't bring him back to your bed. This will only create a routine that won't improve your sleep or his over the long run.

## **What should I do if my child keeps getting out of bed and tries to get into my bed?**

If your child is old enough to climb out of bed and come looking for you, return him to his bed immediately and tell him that it's time to go to sleep. Leave as soon as he is lying down again.

While you may have to repeat this action several times over several days, if you remain calm and consistent, eventually your child will stop this behaviour.

You should also take precautions to keep your child safe during his night time wanderings. Keep stairs gated and be sure that there's nothing else that he can get into if he gets out of bed.

## **What should I do if my child has a nightmare?**

Bad dreams can be common among toddlers. When a nightmare awakens your child, hold and comfort him. Let him tell you about it if he can and reassure him that dreams are not real. Stay with your child until he's calm.

You may be able to help prevent some nightmares by choosing stories and television programs without frightening characters or images.

Disclaimer: This content is shared for informational purposes only and not intended to be a substitute for professional/medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. We recommended that you always seek the advice of your healthcare professional for any questions you may have regarding a medical condition/specific situation.

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