

A parent's guide to...

Sleep

Sleep affects children's development and well-being in a number of ways. *Penny Tassoni* explains what these are and offers some advice to help make sure your child gets the hours they need



It may seem surprising, but sleep is a key factor in the health and development of children. Of course, love and stimulation are important too, but when sufficient sleep is added into the mix, a near perfect formula is created. This is because sleep is a deep-seated, biological need and so cannot be ignored.

In the past few years, health and educational professionals have become concerned about how much sleep young children are having. Here, we offer some advice for parents and carers.

FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

1. Sleep is needed for learning

Concentration and memory are two factors affecting how well we learn. Sleep is when the brain reviews the experiences of the day and starts to file the information that becomes the basis of our memories.

Where experiments have deprived adults of sleep, the ability to remember goes quickly. Similarly, lack of sleep affects our ability to focus and concentrate and so impacts again on learning.

2. Sleep and behaviour are linked

Children, like adults, become grumpy and fairly unreasonable if they have not had enough sleep. This is because sleep is important in helping us to manage our emotions and also our impulses.

As young children have quick-changing emotions and are impulsive at the best of times, things take a turn for the worse when they become tired.

3. Naps help children to sleep at night

It may seem counter-intuitive, but restricting or stopping naps for

children during the day can make bedtimes harder to manage.

This is because children who need naps often become overtired, causing them to grow restless and show signs of hyperactivity. As a result, the adults often believe that their children are not sufficiently tired. A nap in the late morning or early afternoon can avoid this.

4. Lack of sleep is linked to child obesity

There have now been several research projects that show a correlation between lack of sleep and child obesity. While sleep is a very sedentary activity, it is important in hormone regulation. Researchers have found that two hormones that relate to appetite and hunger are affected when children are not gaining enough sleep.

5. Sleep is needed to fight off infections

The immune system is responsible for fighting off infections and so plays an important role in a child's health. Sleep is important for children because their immune system is still developing and sleep seems to strengthen it.

This, in turn, means that children who are not sleeping long enough are more likely to have repeated infections and may take longer to get over colds and coughs.

WHY SELF-SETTLING IS IMPORTANT

One of the key skills that babies and children need to learn is 'self settling'. This is the ability to relax and drop off to sleep without any aids, such as being rocked or sucking from a bottle or breast.

Self-settling is important several times during the night, and a child

will go through different stages of sleep. Between each stage, there is a period of lighter sleep or partial waking. It is often in these moments that children wake up because the aids that helped them to drop off are no longer there.

FIVE TIPS TO ENSURE A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

1. Make sure your child gets outdoors every day

Being outdoors helps the body to set its own internal clock as a response to the daylight. The hormones that keep us awake or tell us it is time to go to sleep are very light sensitive. This is why dimming lights is important before sleep.

2. Avoid screen time just before bedtime

Screens, including computers and television, can trick the body into thinking that it is daytime. Instead, use other ways of helping your child to wind down (see activities suggested later). Also avoid allowing your child to fall asleep watching television or a DVD, as your child needs to learn to self-settle.

3. Allow enough time for your child to wind down

Children are not machines that can be turned off. It takes most

children at least half an hour to an hour to wind down and be ready for sleep. During this time, avoid anything that will create tension or excitement.

4. Ensure your child gets enough exercise

Vigorous exercise is important for toddlers and children and when combined with being outside it can help children to sleep for longer. Having said this, vigorous exercise just before bed will stimulate children and make it harder for them to sleep.

5. Keep to a routine

Wherever possible, stick to the same routine each night. Children who fall asleep in front of the television one night but in a car another night can become very disorientated. If you realise that your child is not getting enough sleep, move bedtime forward by ten minutes each night over a number of days rather than doing it in one go.

COMMON PROBLEMS

My son has nightmares

Nightmares occur during a period of sleep known as rapid-eye movement. Nightmares are common in children from the age of three years onwards. They can be a result of children becoming overtired or as a result of stress.

Be calm and reassuring if your child has a nightmare, but once totally soothed, put them back in their own bed and listen out until you know that your child has fallen back asleep.

While nightmares are common, do think about



whether your child has access to material that is frightening or is becoming overtired. Building a longer bedtime routine that is more relaxing may also help.

My two-year-old son keeps sneaking into our bed in the middle of the night

This is a common problem and, unfortunately, is unlikely to go away by itself. It is linked to those stages of partial awakening in sleep, and instead of self-settling, your child has developed a habit of using you as a sleep aid.

The strategy to change this habit is quite simple. Each time your child comes into your room and, ideally, before he reaches your bed, lead him back to his own bed. Avoid eye contact, but do talk to him and give him lots of cuddles. Simply tuck him in and say good night before promptly leaving.

As this strategy does require you to be proactive, start it at a time when you know you can catch up on your own sleep afterwards.

Most children respond to this technique within three or four nights, but it does require total consistency, so that each time the child is taken straight back to their room. ➤





My three-year-old daughter has always slept in my bed. Now I have a new partner, this is causing problems

Firstly, it is worth recognising that this will be a significant change for your daughter if she has always co-slept with you. You will need to make sure that she does not see the move to a separate room as a rejection. Instead, treat this as joint project.

With her input, create a bedroom that she likes. Make sure on the first day that she is to use this room that you have given her plenty of attention, but also created the conditions that will help her to sleep (see earlier advice on this).

It is likely that she will come into your room at first, but gently keep taking her back to her own room. You will need to be patient and also consistent for this to work, but after a week or so your daughter will learn to fall asleep alone.

ACTIVITIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD SLEEP

The key to successful naps and bedtimes is to create some

familiarity. This is why the standard advice is to create a routine.

Routines allow children to relax as every step is predictable. This lowers the heart rate and levels of arousal and so creates conditions for sleep.

Ideally, children also need to nap or go to bed at about the same time every day as the body develops sleep patterns. The need for predictability is why babies and children find it hard to fall asleep in new places or at different times. Here are some tried-and-tested ways to help your child wind down for sleep.

Have a shower or bath

Having a shower or bath can help prepare a child for bedtime. Warm water and an opportunity to play with familiar toys before changing into nightwear can signal the start of the bedtime routine.

Use this opportunity to chat to your child, as this helps children to feel reassured and safe. Even drying your child can be made into a routine. Wrapping your baby or toddler with a towel and playing peek-a-boo is a good example of this.

HOW MUCH SLEEP?

The total amount of sleep that children need is calculated over a 24-hour period and so includes naps. As we saw earlier, naps seem to play an important part in a child's healthy sleep, and many children will still need naps even when they are four years old.

Here are the current guidelines for children's sleep, though it is worth remembering that there will be variations between individual children.

SLEEP GUIDELINES

Age	Daytime	Nighttime
3 months	5 hours	10 hours
6 months	4 hours	10 hours
9 months	2.75 hours	11.25 hours
12 months	2.5 hours	11.5 hours
2 years	1.25 hours	11.75 hours
3 years	1 hour	11 hours
4 years		11.5 hours
5 years		11 hours

Source: www.nhs.gov/livewell

Cuddle up

Before going to bed, it is worth spending time cuddling and stroking your child. With babies, rocking movements seem to help, though ideally you should stop rocking once your child becomes drowsy so that they learn to self-settle.

You could even consider trying out baby or toddler massage, as many parents find this helpful, especially in situations where their child has become overtired.

Share a book

Taking time to spend a moment with your child before turning out the light can make a significant difference if done as part of a routine. Choose a couple of books that you can look at quietly while your child is in their cot or bed.

As the aim is to relax your child and help them to unwind, it is worth choosing familiar books and also talking quietly. If you can dim the light in your child's room, this can also set the scene. ■