Sleep 3 - 5 years

sleep

3-5 years
Sleep

There is a wide range of ‘normal’ sleep patterns between three and five years. Many children of this age need about 10 to 12 hours of sleep at night. Young children may still need a daytime nap as well, but by kindergarten age only a few children still need a sleep during the day.

Bedtime can vary a lot. Some may go to bed by 6.30 p.m., while many go to bed later, up to 9.30 p.m. or later. Wake up time may be early or late. Often children who wake up late also go to bed late.

Children under three to four years may still feel insecure when they are separated from their parents, especially at night. At this age they may still wake at night and need comforting.

Going to bed

Children often do not want to go to sleep. Going to sleep means missing out on things. Many children are still afraid of the separation at night, especially those under three.

- Children generally find comfort and security in rituals (special things you do at bedtime). They help children prepare for the idea of going to bed.
- A typical ritual may include a relaxed bath, a drink, cuddle, story, kiss and ‘goodnight’.
- Work out your ritual around what is special for your child.
The half hour before bed is not a good time for tickles, wrestles, quarrels, TV or other excitement. It helps to have a ‘wind down’ time and dim the lights to help prepare for sleep.

Let children 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 the pestering for more time to stay up.

Explain to children that everything that they want has to be done before bed. Calls for drinks, trips to the toilet, etc. Tell your child that you love her and will be nearby.

Some children can relax more easily with a night light, soft music or a story tape playing.

Many toddlers like to take a special toy to bed or have their dummy.

Some also need the door open so that they know that you are near. If your child is anxious, let her know that you will pop in during the night to check how she is.

The inner confidence to feel secure when parents are not present is still developing by three to four years of age. If night waking is being caused by separation anxiety, it usually improves after four years of age.

Night waking

Night waking is common. Some children can resettle themselves. At other times they need help to go back to sleep.

If your child needs help to go back to sleep you may need to change some of the ‘going to sleep’ routines. Try to settle him in his bed when he first goes to sleep (not in your bed or in front of the TV).

During the night when he wakes, go to him and quietly reassure him that everything is all right. Say something like ‘sleep time now’, then walk out of the room as long as he is not crying.

If your child comes into your room when he wakes, lead him back to his bed, and resettle him there if he is calm, otherwise a small mattress near your bed may help (see below).

Some parents find that they get a better night’s sleep if they let their child come into their own bed during the early hours of the morning. If your sleep is not disturbed by this, there is nothing wrong with this pattern, but if you cannot sleep well with a child in your bed, you will need to persist with taking him back to his own bed or try:

- putting a spare bed in your child’s room, so that you can be comfortable and can rest while he needs you close
- to your bed during the day (get her to help you). Settle her in her own bed for her night time sleep. Tell her that she can come into your room to sleep if she wakes up at night and needs to be close to you.

At times when children are sick, lonely, sad or frightened they may need help to go back to sleep.

The changes in your child’s life, e.g. moving house, separations, family tensions or starting preschool, can be a factor.
These ideas also help if your child is anxious or upset and needs to be near you during the night.

As children grow older and become more secure, they will not need to be so close to you.

Most children no longer need to share their parent’s bed or bedroom by the time they are four or five, unless something stressful is happening in their lives.

In some families, children sleep in the same room as their parents for many years. This can help children feel very safe.

**Going to bed problems**

There is no ‘right way’ to solve sleep problems. Sometimes doing whatever works, and does not distress you or your child, is good enough.

Sometimes parents find it is hard to get young children to go to bed, or their waking early causes problems - and there are many different reasons for this. In some cultures children sleep in or near the action, and can nap whenever they feel tired - this is not a problem. However parents are often tired at the end of the day and need time to themselves, or need extra sleep in the morning - more than their child does.

Some of the reasons a child may not want to go to bed may be:

- having to go off on his own and leaving people or interesting things that are happening in the house behind
- being frightened of being left alone (no matter what time you put your child to bed if he is afraid or worried he will still be unhappy)
- not being tired yet (probably will go to bed happily but later)
- a very busy or exciting day, or too much excitement just before bed (quiet wind-down time helps)
- lack of a night-time routine to help him wind down
- going to bed too early.

**Note:** children usually wake when they have had enough sleep, so early waking may be because of early bedtime.
Some things to try with older children

There are some things you can’t control, e.g. sunrise, however there are other things you can influence.

- Make sure your child has a regular bedtime that gets later as she needs less sleep.
- Use a relaxing bedtime routine - without excitement and stimulation.
- If your child is more attached to one parent it sometimes helps if that parent spends calm and quiet time with the child before bedtime. Then the other parent puts her to bed.
- Play soft music or leave a quiet radio playing.
- Leave the door open or shut - whichever your child wants.
- Sometimes children will settle where the action is, and can be carried to their own beds later. It may mean that your child may wake later and will want you because she doesn’t know where she is and will need you to help her resettle.
- If you decide that you want your child to go to bed a bit earlier and you don’t mind if she wakes earlier too, try putting her to bed a quarter of an hour earlier.

- Sleep rhythms take some time to change so you can expect to wait for about two weeks before you see any real change in sleep behaviour.
- Then, if that works, you might try another quarter of an hour.
- You can help to change early waking by putting your child to bed later to see if that will help her sleep longer in the morning.

Controlled crying

Some people may suggest that you let your child ‘cry it out’ or that you use controlled crying/comforting. This is not recommended. Your young child needs you to respond when he cries, to help him feel safe and secure.
Reminders

- Everyone’s need for sleep is different. You can’t make rules on the basis of age.

- Sleep problems are sometimes more to do with where and when a child sleeps, rather than whether a child sleeps.

- What you do about your child’s waking depends on what you feel comfortable with, and what will help your child feel secure - so he is able to move on to the next stage of growing up.

- Children usually grow out of night waking by the time they are three or four (when they feel more secure being by themselves).
For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline
  8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week
  Telephone (08) 9368 9368
  Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546
  www.ngala.com.au
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line
  Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24hr service)
  Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432

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