
Handy guide

Sleep cues

Promoting safer sleep

For parents, carers, health visitors, public health nurses
and community nursery nurses

Advice for parents

Sleeplessness is part of having a baby, babies spend their first few months with little concept of night and day. Newborn babies will probably get over tired if they have been awake for more than an hour and young babies are not capable of learning a routine, so it is important to respond to their cues.

0 to 3 months old New-born babies get overtired if they are awake for one hour to one and half hours. They are not capable of following routine so it is important to follow their cues:

- Whine and cry
- Stare off into space
- Turn their face from moving objects or hide their face in carer's chest
- Yawn and stretch frequently
- Rub their eyes or pull their ears
- Lose interest in people or toys
- Go quiet and still

- Some babies arch their back
- They may have jerky body movement

3 to 6 months Probably tired after one and half to three hours

6 to 12 months Probably tired after two to three hours

Signs of overtiredness:

- Clumsiness
- Clinginess
- Grizzling
- Crying
- Demanding constant attention
- Boredom with toys
- Fussy with feeding

12 to 18 months Babies may get overtired if they miss their morning or afternoon nap.

How much sleep does your baby need?

In a 24-hour period the sleep requirements are:

New-born Babies can sleep from 8 hours to 18 -20 hours in total. They wake in the night if they are hungry. They also wake if they are too hot or too cold.

3 to 6 months Babies need fewer feeds at night and sleep longer, up to 8 hours or more at night. By 4 months they usually sleep longer at night than in the day.

Sleep cycles and stages of sleep

Stage 1: very light sleep, easily woken.

Stage 2: still light sleep but more relaxed (best time to leave the room if you are trying to slip away).

Stage 3: Deep sleep. It will be difficult to wake your baby at this stage.

REM sleep is when dreams occur, it is vital for mental and emotional development. The brain becomes very active but the body is relaxed.

0 to 3months Each sleep cycle lasts about 60 minutes, so expect them to stir at this time.

Over 3 months It last for about 90 minutes.

Our body clock

Circadian rhythm

The circadian rhythm is our internal body clock which takes its cue from light and dark. It is important to strengthen child's body clock so that he/she develops a regular sleep and wake up time.

Ways to do this

Put your child to bed at the same time each night. Wake up your child at the same time each morning, even at weekends

Sometimes the body clock can go off track especially when the clocks change from winter time to summer time. You can reset their body clocks by bringing bedtime forward by 15 minutes every three nights until you reach the desired time.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone that occurs naturally in our bodies when it gets dark. Melatonin production is

interfered with by the light from screen activities – using computers, iPads, mobile phones, watching TV; it is best to avoid screen time in the lead up to bedtime.

Sleep routines

A good sleep routine can promote the circadian rhythm and melatonin production. Planning is essential. First you need to decide what time bedtime is and then create a detailed plan for the hour leading up to it.

If your child is not settling until late, you will need to gradually move their bedtime forward by 15 minutes every three days, moving the routine too. It is helpful if both parents/carers carry out the bedtime routine to prevent dependency on one person.

Tips for a good bedtime routine

- **Turn off all screens** an hour before bedtime
- **Dim lights and close curtains** to help create some darkness to promote Melatonin production
- **Offer quiet activities** like colouring, jigsaws, threading, building with bricks etc
- **Consider introducing supper time** slow releasing carbohydrates are great for keeping little tummies full. Dairy products are very calming and avoid anything with sugar or caffeine
- **Baths are great if your child finds them relaxing** 30 minutes before bedtime is ideal, as it aids relaxation by increasing their body temperature; it is the slow decrease in body temperature after a bath that makes us more relaxed and sleepy
- **Get ready for bed in the same order** pyjamas on, brush teeth and go to the toilet
- **Once in bed spend some time reading** a bedtime story to your child
- **Give hugs and kisses** and tell your child: "it is night time, go to sleep". Turn off lights and leave the room
- If they cry, go in and comfort but try not to pick them up if you can help it. Leave room when they are calm
- **Repeat until they are asleep**
- **Wake them up at the same time** each morning to strengthen their body clock

Common sleep problems

Self-settling

The biggest difficulty is often that children can't settle themselves to sleep at the start of the night. Some need to be rocked or held or need a parent in bed with them. Once they come through a sleep cycle to the point of partial awakening and find conditions have changed, they want attention again. Teaching children to self soothe themselves can be done gently and gradually. Babies need to gradually learn how to manage this separation and will take their cues from their environment and those around them. The baby will tune into any messages about whether it is safe and okay to be separate and by oneself.

Changes in routine

Try and stick to the same routine as much as possible to help ensure that your child feels safe and secure because change in routines can impact on your child's sleep.

Feeling hungry or thirsty

Adding a supper time can help and if thirsty, offer water. It is best to avoid anything with sugar like biscuits, cake or caffeine which is found in cola and hot chocolate, in the run up to bedtime. Good choices would include anything with calcium like yoghurt, glass of milk, porridge or a banana smoothie.

Methods to help with sleep

The 'disappearing chair' routine

This routine can be used for a child who tries to keep you with them at bedtime or who wakes in the night:

- Put your child to bed with the usual routine
- Sit in a chair beside the bed reading a book (or pretend to do so) If your child is very upset you may need to sit on the bed
- Don't speak to, or look at, your child
- If your child sits up or tries to get out of bed, gently put him/her down in lying down position.

Every night the distance between you and your child should be increased. When the chair is outside the door you have completed the programme.

This process can take several days or several months. Be prepared for the problem to get worse for a night or two. In some cases it may be that your child is testing you to see if you are really serious.

Making a new sleep routine is best started on a Friday night so that you are not under pressure and can outlast your child's attempts to sabotage the new routine.

Night terrors and nightmares

Night terrors usually happen shortly after going to sleep. Your child will appear to be terrified but is actually asleep and won't take comfort from you.

What to do

- Wait for the terror to pass and he/she settles back to sleep
- When these are regular, try rousing the child ten minutes before the night terror usually happens. Do this for two weeks to break the cycle
- Children normally grow out of night terrors; if you are concerned consult your GP.

Nightmares are bad dreams that your child will wake from and will usually take comfort from you.

What to do

- Reassure them that it was a dream
- Don't reinforce the nightmare – there is no need to check for monsters, remember they don't exist.

Children with extra needs

Additional triggers for sleep problems

- **Bedding** should suit your child's sensory needs
- **White noise** may help sound sensitive children to sleep better
- **Blackout blinds** give the room constant conditions
- **The concept of time could be confusing** for some children especially those with autism. It is even more important to make sure that children go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Always try to make sure the children change into nightwear at night and daytime clothes during the day even if there is nothing planned and a PJ day would be easier
- If a child uses a **visual time table** at nursery or school you should incorporate this at home using similar symbols so as to not cause confusion

- If you can **identify the triggers** for their anxiety, try writing a social story e.g. if they are afraid of the dark, try writing a story to reassure your child that they are safe
- **Create a calm area** they can go to, like a pop-up tent
- If your child has an occupational therapist it is worth asking if **weighted items** (such as a weighted blanket) would help to calm them in the run up to bedtime
- **Hand eye activities** could aid relaxation
- **Specialist alarm clocks** could be brought to show children the time through use of pictures or visual cues e.g. Gro clocks, use fairy lights on a timer as an alternative

Any questions?

The health visitor's role starts during pregnancy and continues to offer support through the first few weeks after the birth, and all the way through until early childhood.

All health visitors are nurses or midwives with specialist training in family and community health. They work with parents and their families to improve health and wellbeing.

Your Health Visiting team can provide advice and guidance on your child's sleep routines or anything else that might be worrying you about your child. If you have any questions, please ask. If you would like an interpreter please also let your health visitor know and they will arrange this for you.

For more information or to contact your health visitor, visit:

www.ghc.nhs.uk/healthvisiting

Useful websites

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/caring-for-a-newborn/helping-your-baby-to-sleep

Cry-sis

www.cry-sis.org.uk

The Sleep Council

www.sleepcouncil.org.uk

Millpond Sleep Clinic

www.millpondsleepclinic.com

The Lullaby Trust

www.lullabytrust.org.uk