



Understanding Children

Children and Sleep



Children have amazing amounts of energy. They can play for hours and don't want to miss out on anything going on around them. In fact, if adults don't intervene, most children will bypass naps and put off bedtime for as long as possible.

However, regular rest and sleep are necessary. Just as food is needed for energy and growth, sleep allows the body to relax and refuel for the next burst of energy. Children who do not learn how to rest and relax at naptime often become overly tired and have trouble going to sleep at night.

Parents/caregivers also need a chance to relax and have some "down time." After a respite during naptime or a well-deserved night's sleep, adults will be better prepared to interact with children.

Sleep Needs

Young children need lots of sleep. They can't get by on a few hours like adults tend to do. It is not realistic to expect children to operate on the same sleep schedule as adults.

Newborn babies will sleep about 16 hours a day at first. But remember each baby requires a different amount of sleep. Parents/caregivers will soon learn what is "normal" for a particular child. Babies don't know the difference between night and day and will sometimes get them mixed up, sleeping more during the day and less at night.

Place healthy babies on their backs when putting them down to sleep. Research indicates this action can reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome

(SIDS). Do not put babies to sleep on soft surfaces or with pillows or stuffed toys. These could cover a child's airway.

Babies in the first year still sleep a lot. They need at least two naps a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, each lasting from one to three hours.

Toddlers between ages two and three may sleep 9 to 13 hours a day. Many toddlers will take one long nap around lunchtime. Or, they may take two shorter naps.



Preschoolers, ages four and five, need at least 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night. Some will take naps but others will resist going to sleep.

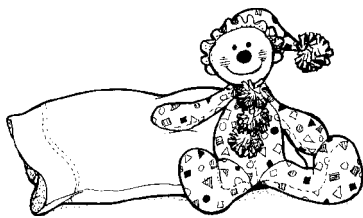
Routines

Routines are important for children. Knowing what to expect helps them feel more secure. Routines help children develop self-control, independence, responsibility, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

Naptime and bedtime routines should be a positive time for both adults and children. A set sleeping routine can help lessen sleeping problems.

An important concept to consider is the difference between putting a child to bed and putting a child to sleep. It is the adult's responsibility to put a child to bed. Then the child has a choice to either rest or sleep. No one can make a child sleep.

There are several things a parent/caregiver can do to establish a calming naptime/bedtime routine. Although each child and family situation is unique, the following ideas may be helpful.



- Give children some transition time. Say, "it's naptime in 10 minutes" or "after I read you a story, it will be time to go to sleep." It may help to use a timer or set the alarm on a clock so children will know when time is up.



- Set rules about number of stories, drinks of water, popping out of bed, etc.
- Plan a wind-down or calming activity. Read a story, turn down the lights, play quiet music, or just talk. TV, movies, roughhousing, or active games are not good choices prior to naptime or bedtime.
- Allow children to have some security – favorite stuffed animals, blankie, night light, the door open, flashlight by the bed.
- Talk about fears and anxieties. Do a "monster check" if that seems to be a concern.
- Avoid activities that compete with resting or going to sleep. Have adults and older children observe similar quiet time. This will encourage the little ones to go to sleep. Remember, they don't want to miss out on anything exciting.

- Decide on a regular bedtime that is approximately 10 to 12 hours before the child needs to get up. If a child is getting up too early, he may be going to bed too soon. On the other hand, if a child is grumpy or drowsy, he may not be getting to bed early enough.

- Adjust daytime naps to support the bedtime schedule. Remember naptime is a time for rest and relaxing. Children may or may not actually sleep during naptime.

As children grow and develop, their sleep patterns and needs will probably change. Other situations also can cause a disruption. These include a new bed; a new room or sleeping arrangement; moving to a new home; disruption in family relationships (new baby, divorce, death, marriage); absence of a family member or pet; or a change in daytime schedule.

Common Problems

Children often wake and call for a parent/caregiver while sleeping. When this happens, give the child some time to go back to sleep. If crying or calling persists, check on the child. Reassure the child that everything is all right and then leave. Sleeping with the child, giving treats, taking the child to parents' bed, etc. will only reward the child and start habits that will be difficult to break.

Night terrors and nightmares are a fairly common occurrence in children. Children having night terrors will wake up suddenly soon after falling asleep. Children may scream, sit up in bed, breathe quickly, be glassy eyed, and also be confused. This can last up to 30 minutes. Children will fall back to sleep quickly and will wake in the morning not remembering anything.



Parents/caregivers should remain calm when children have night terrors or nightmares. Hold the child and talk in a soothing voice. Stay with the child until he/she falls asleep because he/she needs to feel safe and secure.

Children having nightmares can remember the scary details and have trouble going back to sleep. Nightmares usually happen in the early morning hours. Nightmares are often the result of events, situations, or images that trouble a child. Children will have nightmares more often when anxious or under stress.

*Learning how to rest and relax is a valuable skill.
Balancing active and quiet times helps people stay well both physically and emotionally.*

Prepared by Donna K. Donald, extension family life specialist, Iowa State University. Formerly PM 1784.