



Helping Young Children Sleep Better

Sleeping issues for children from 6 to 12 months old

Just as you like to go to bed happy and content with life, so does your child. Sometimes, however, babies from 6 to 12 months of age feel insecure and unhappy when their parents leave them at bedtime.

Walking away when your baby is crying may make her feel as if you're abandoning her. Some parents bring their babies to bed with them. Other parents prefer not to have their babies sleep with them. If your baby is crying, but you want her to sleep in her crib, try comforting her by telling her that she is safe, you are close by, and now is the time to go to sleep. Even if he's too young to understand your words, he'll be comforted by your calming tone of voice and your closeness. Here are a few additional suggestions to make bedtime easier:



- Keep pre-bedtime hours affectionate and enjoyable. Listening to you read a story, being gently rocked in your arms, or listening to soft music are comforting to your child.
- Follow the same routine each evening so your baby knows when bedtime is coming. For example, at about the same time each evening, follow a routine of supper, play, bath and bedtime.
- Have a going-to-bed ritual, such as saying goodnight to all the stuffed animals followed by singing a lullaby to your child.
- If your baby cries when you leave, go back to him. Tell him that you're close by, kiss him, gently pat his back, and leave. You may have to do this several times to reassure him that you will come back.
- When she cries for you, try talking to your child without entering the room. Perhaps your quiet voice is enough to reassure her.

Some babies wake more easily during the night than others. If this is the case with your child try the following:

- If possible, keep your baby away from loud outdoor disturbances, such as highway noises. Heavy curtains or double glazed windows should help.
- Keep friends and family members out of the baby's room. Leave the door ajar so you can check-up on him from a distance.

- Make sure your baby is not too cold or too warm.
- A thick coating of a protective cream at night, plus a diaper with a stay-dry lining, will protect your child's sensitive skin under her diaper and help her sleep more soundly. Ask your doctor to recommend a protective cream.

For sudden nighttime awakenings, respond to and comfort your baby as quickly as possible. He may have had a nightmare or be in physical pain. Often the sight of a parent is enough reassurance to put a child back to sleep. It is often impossible to know what causes bad dreams. If they occur frequently, however, consider slowing up on anything that may be placing strain on your baby, such as weaning. Again, try to keep bedtime relaxed and enjoyable.

If your child wakes early in the morning before the rest of the family is ready to get up, try turning on a low watt bulb in her room and giving her a toy to play with in her crib. Try making her feel more comfortable by changing her diaper or offering her a drink.

Toddlers

Sleeping problems are extremely common in young children. This may be due to a child's individual personality or to a parent's lack of setting sleep-related limits. Parents also need to be aware of the changing sleep habits of growing children.

For example, at age two, toddlers sleep about 10 to 13 hours out of the 24-hour day. They begin to stay awake longer before they fall asleep during afternoon naptime. Parents may have to start naptime earlier in the afternoon or wake the child from his nap. A child may have difficulty going to sleep at night if his nap extends into the late afternoon.

It's a good idea to set aside a set amount of time for bedtime rituals such as reading a story and tucking in the stuffed animals. Eventually, most toddlers will become accustomed to this time and will settle down to sleep.

About 30 percent of children between 1 and 4 years of age wake during the night at least once a week. These night wakings tend to peak between 18 months and 2 years and then decline. Children may wake during the night because they are too hot or too cold. Or, they may be teething or not feel well. Attend to their needs, however, try to limit conversation and social interaction with them. These special times together should not become a habit.

If your toddler wakes when he or she changes positions during the night try the following:

- Help her learn to drop off to sleep herself. Softly reassure her without entering her room or, enter, pat her back gently and then leave quietly.
- Avoid going into your toddler's room every time you hear movement. You may disturb him.
- If she tends to fall asleep on top of her bedclothes, cover her when you go to bed so she doesn't get cold early in the morning.
- Put a 15-watt nightlight in your child's room if he is afraid of the dark. This won't keep him from waking, but might stop him from needing you!

- If your child uses a pacifier, put several of them close beside her when you go to bed. She may find one of them instead of crying out for you.
- Thirst will wake your toddler, so don't hold back on giving him a drink before bed time.

Some children crawl out of bed to join their parents in the living room or bedroom. If this happens, keep calm. Quietly, but firmly, tell your toddler she needs to go back to her bed. Tell her she can go by herself or you will walk back with her. The decision is hers to make. Again, limit conversation and social interaction with your child.

Naptime

What do you do when your toddler doesn't like to nap? First, try to relax about it. Perhaps you are upset because your wide-awake child makes it difficult to get other work accomplished. Realize, however, that your child is in the process of learning about the world. He's busy playing and being with you and other adults and children. He doesn't want to take time out for a nap.

Your child still needs to rest and have some quiet time during the day, although he may not sleep. Both you and he would benefit from putting him in his crib, stroller or playpen with some quiet toys. If your child cries or fusses, go to him quickly to soothe him. You don't want him to feel like a prisoner in his own crib. You may need to stay with him until he quiets down. Some lucky parents are able to say to their children, "I'm going to do some quiet work, while you play quietly with your toys."

Preschool children

Children from 4 to 6 years-of-age sleep about 10 to 11 hours. Growth hormone is released during sleep, so it's important for children to get enough sleep for proper growth and the ability to play and learn. Most young preschoolers take one nap a day. At some time during the preschool years children generally stop taking naps, although rest or a quiet time after lunch helps them to keep active until bedtime.



Bad dreams

When you are awakened by your screaming child, very likely it is from a bad dream. Go to him very quickly. Most likely one glimpse of you and a pat on the back will put your youngster back to sleep. If you wait, he will become more frightened and it will take longer to soothe him down to sleep.

Preventing nightmares is more difficult. Try to remove your child's stress by being tolerant and loving, and by talking about the situation. Preschoolers may have very rigid and lengthy routines before bed such as getting a drink of water, kissing all the members of the family and the family pets, listening to a story and a song, and taking a security object such as a stuffed animal to bed. These routines seem to help children develop enough confidence to separate from the family and stay alone in a darkened room.

Sometimes your child is afraid of something before she even falls asleep. For example, she may think there is a monster in her room. An investigation of her room to show her there are no monsters does little good. Your child needs to gain control over her fears.

You can help her do this by showing her that you accept the fear, but that you aren't afraid of the monster. Perhaps you could say, "Let's tell that monster we won't allow him in the house. I'll walk him outside and lock the door behind him. Do you want to come with me?" This should calm her fear and will probably be fun.

Here are some fears of children at different developmental stages that might trigger a nightmare:

Infancy: loud noises, falling, separation from parents, strange people

Preschool: animals, the dark, separation, imaginary monsters, going to school

School Age: family fights or other family concerns, punishment, rejection by schoolmates, war, crime

At some time, most children have recurrent episodes of fearfulness that disrupt their sleep. Fears are often at the root of the most common sleep problems such as resistance at bedtime, trouble falling asleep and nightmares. Yet, sleep disruption due to fears is generally a temporary stage in a child's development.

Keep in mind that your main responsibility as a parent is to help your child learn how to sleep by himself or herself. Following the suggestions given above will help both you and your child.

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