

How much sleep does my child require?

Sleep is very important to children's well-being. The link between a lack of sleep and a child's behavior isn't always obvious.

When adults are tired, they can be grumpy or have low energy, but children can become hyper, disagreeable, and have extremes in behavior (displaying frequent irritability, overreact emotionally, forget easily, have difficulty concentrating, wake often during the night). Most children's sleep requirements fall within a predictable range of hours based on their age, but each child is a unique individual with distinct sleep needs.

Toddlers

From ages 1 to 3, most toddlers sleep about 10 to 13 hours. Separation anxiety, or just the desire to be up with mom and dad (and not miss anything), can motivate a child to stay awake. So can simple toddler-style contrariness. Parents sometimes make the mistake of thinking that keeping a child up will make him or her sleepier for bedtime. In fact, though, children can have a harder time sleeping if they're overtired. Set regular bedtimes and naptimes. Though most toddlers take naps during the day, you don't have to force your child to nap. But it's important to schedule some quiet time, even if your child chooses not to sleep. Establishing a bedtime routine helps children relax, get ready for sleep, and sleep through the night. For a toddler, the routine may be from 15 to 30 minutes long and include calming activities such as reading a story, bathing, and listening to soft music.

Typical bedtime routine:

1. Have a light snack
2. Take a bath.
3. Put on pajamas.
4. Brush teeth.
5. Read a story.
6. Make sure the room is quiet and at a comfortable temp.
7. Put your child to bed.
8. Say goodnight and leave.

Whatever the nightly ritual is, your toddler will probably insist that it be the same every night. Just don't allow rituals to become too long or too complicated. Whenever possible, allow your toddler to make bedtime choices within the routine: which pajamas to wear, which stuffed animal to take to bed, what music to play. This gives your little one a sense of control over the routine.

It is helpful to:

- Make bedtime the same time every night.
- Make bedtime a positive and relaxing experience without TV or videos. According to one recent study, TV viewing prior to bed can lead to difficulty falling and staying asleep. Save your child's favorite



relaxing, non-stimulating activities until last and have them occur in the child's bedroom.

- Keep the bedtime environment (e.g. light, temperature) the same all night long.

Have your child form positive associations with sleeping. A child should not need a parent to help him/her fall asleep. The child who falls asleep on his or her own will be better able to return to sleep during normal nighttime awakenings and sleep throughout the night.

But even the best sleepers give parents an occasional wake-up call. Teething can awaken a toddler and so can dreams. Active dreaming begins at this age, and for very young children, dreams can be pretty alarming. Nightmares are particularly frightening to a toddler, who can't distinguish imagination from reality. (So carefully select what TV programs, if any, your toddler sees in the hours before bedtime.) Comfort and hold your child at these times. Let your toddler talk about the dream if he or she wants to, and stay until your child is calm. Then encourage your child to go back to sleep as soon as possible. Except during conditions when the child is sick, has been injured or clearly requires your assistance, it is important to give your child a consistent message that they are expected to fall asleep on their own.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers sleep about 10 to 12 hours per night. A preschool child who gets adequate rest at night may no longer need a daytime nap. Instead, a quiet time may be substituted. As children give up their naps, bedtimes may come earlier than during the toddler years.

If your child is needing more sleep simply move your child's bedtime up. This may sound impossible at first, but by moving his entire bedtime routine up half an hour, you'll help him associate bedtime with an earlier time. In fact, you may be surprised to find that he goes to sleep more easily and sleeps through the night more regularly when he is well-rested. It is important that young children are able to put themselves back to sleep alone. If they are used to your presence to assist them to sleep, withdraw your presence from their sleep environment slowly but surely.