



Sleep — or lack of it — is probably the most-discussed aspect of baby care. New parents discover its vital importance those first few weeks and months. The quality and quantity of an infant's sleep affects the well-being of everyone in the household.

And sleep struggles rarely end with a growing child's move from crib to bed. It simply changes form. Instead of cries, it's pleas or refusals. Instead of a feeding at 3:00 AM, it's a nightmare or request for water.

So how do you get your child to bed through the cries, screams, avoidance tactics, and pleas? How should you respond when you're awakened in the middle of the night? And how much sleep is enough for your children?

How Much Is Enough?

It all depends on a child's age. Charts that list the hours of sleep likely to be required by an infant or a 2-year-old may cause concern when individual differences aren't considered. These numbers are simply averages reported for large groups of children of particular ages.

There's no magical number of hours required by all children in a certain age group. Two-year-old Sarah might sleep from 8:00 PM to 8:00 AM, whereas 2-year-old Johnny is just as alert the next day after sleeping from 9:00 PM to 6:00 AM.

Still, sleep is very important to children's well-being. The link between a lack of sleep and a child's behaviour 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 behaviour.

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.

Here are some approximate numbers based on age, accompanied by age-appropriate pro-sleep tactics.

Babies (up to 6 Months)

There is no sleep formula for new-borns because their internal clocks aren't fully developed yet. They generally sleep or drowse for 16 to 20 hours a day, divided about equally between night and day.

New-borns should be awakened every 3 to 4 hours until their weight gain is established, which typically happens within the first couple of weeks. After that, it's OK if a baby sleeps for longer periods of time. But don't get your slumber hopes up just yet — most infants won't snooze for extended periods of time because they get hungry.

After the first couple of weeks, infants may sleep for as long as 4 or 5 hours — this is about how long their small tummies can go between feedings. If babies do sleep a good stretch at night, they may want to nurse or get the bottle more frequently during the day.

Just when parents feel that sleeping through the night seems like a far-off dream, their baby's sleep time usually begins to shift toward night. At 3 months, a baby averages about 13 hours of sleep in a 24 hour period (4-5 hours of sleep during the day broken into several naps and 8-9 hours at night, usually with an interruption or two). About 90% of babies this age sleep through the night, meaning 5 to 6 hours in a row.

But it's important to recognize that babies aren't always awake when they sound like they are; they can cry and make all sorts of other noises during light sleep. Even if they do wake up in the night, they may only be awake for a few minutes before falling asleep again on their own.

If a baby under 6 months old continues to cry, it's time to respond. Your baby may be genuinely uncomfortable: hungry, wet, cold, or even sick. But routine night time awakenings for changing and feeding should be as quick and quiet as possible. Don't provide any unnecessary stimulation, such as talking, playing, or turning on the lights. Encourage the idea that night time is for sleeping. You have to teach this because your baby doesn't care what time it is as long as his or her needs are met.

Ideally, your baby should be placed in the crib before falling asleep. And it's not too early to establish a simple bedtime routine. Any soothing activities, performed consistently and in the same order each night, can make up the routine. Your baby will associate these with sleeping, and they'll help him or her wind down.

The goal is for babies to fall asleep independently, and to learn to soothe themselves and go back to sleep if they should wake up in the middle of the night.

6 to 12 Months

At 6 months, an infant may nap about 3 hours during the day and sleep about 9 to 11 hours at night. At this age, you can begin to change your response to an infant who awakens and cries during the night.

Parents can give babies a little more time to settle down on their own and go back to sleep. If they don't, comfort them without picking them up (talk softly, rub their backs), then leave — unless they appear to be sick. Sick babies need to be picked up and cared for. If your baby doesn't seem sick and continues to cry, you can wait a little longer, and then repeat the short crib-side visit.

Between 6 and 12 months, separation anxiety, a normal developmental phase, comes into play. But the rules for night time awakenings are the same through a baby's first birthday: Try not to pick up your baby, turn on the lights, sing, talk, play, or feed your child. All of these activities do not allow your baby to learn to fall asleep on his or her own and encourage repeat awakenings.

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 and get ready for sleep. 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.

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 pyjamas 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.

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 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.

Pre-schoolers

Pre-schoolers 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.

Most nursery schools and kindergartens have quiet periods when the children lie on mats or just rest. As kids give up their naps, bedtimes may come earlier than during the toddler years.

School-Age Children and Preteens

School-age children need 10 to 12 hours of sleep a night. Bedtime difficulties can arise at this age for a variety of reasons. Homework, sports and after-school activities, TVs, computers, and video games, as well as hectic family schedules might contribute to kids not getting enough sleep.

Lack of sleep can cause irritable or hyper types of behaviour and may make it difficult for children to pay attention in school. It is important to have a consistent bedtime, especially on school nights. Be sure to leave enough time before bed to allow your child to unwind before lights out.

Teens

Adolescents need about 8½ to 9½ hours of sleep per night, but many don't get it. Because of early school start times on top of schedules packed with school, homework, friends, and activities, they're typically chronically sleep deprived.

And sleep deprivation adds up over time, so an hour less per night is like a full night without sleep by the end of the week. Among other things, an insufficient amount of sleep can lead to:

decreased attentiveness

decreased short-term memory

inconsistent performance

delayed response time

These can cause bad tempers, problems in school, stimulant use, and driving accidents (more than half of "asleep-at-the-wheel" car accidents are caused by teens).

Teens also experience a change in their sleep patterns — their bodies want to stay up late and wake up later, which often leads to them trying to catch up on sleep during the weekend. This sleep schedule irregularity can actually aggravate the problems and make getting to sleep at a reasonable hour during the week even harder.

Ideally, a teen should try to go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every morning, allowing for at least 8 to 9 hours of sleep.

Bedtime Routines

No matter what your child's age, establish a bedtime routine that encourages good sleep habits. These tips can help kids ease into a good night's sleep:

Include a winding-down period in the routine.

Stick to a bedtime, alerting your child both half an hour and 10 minutes beforehand.

Encourage older children and teens to set and maintain a bedtime that allows for the full hours of sleep needed at their age.