

Good sleep habits for infants and children



Key facts

As your child grows, they will sleep for longer and sleep deeper. Good sleep hygiene can help your child get the rest they need to grow. Good sleep habits include exercising during the day, eating well, relaxing around bedtime, and having a bedtime routine.

On this page

What is a good sleep habit?

How does our body regulate sleep?

How much sleep does a child need?

Why are good sleep habits important for my child?

How can I help my child form healthy sleep habits?

Resources and support

What is a good sleep habit?

Actions that help lead to a good night's sleep are called good sleep habits. This is often referred to as good sleep hygiene. It might involve having:

routine sleep times
a relaxed, safe sleep environment

Good sleep habits help your child get the rest they need.

How does our body regulate sleep?

Sleep patterns are controlled by our body's internal clock, also known as our circadian rhythm. It keeps us awake during the day and promotes sleep at night. Melatonin is a hormone that tells our bodies it's time to sleep. Our body clock helps release melatonin at the right time.

When we sleep, we cycle through two stages of sleep - rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and non-REM sleep (NREM). REM sleep is also known as light sleep, while NREM sleep is deep sleep.

Adults experience more deep sleep, while babies mostly sleep lightly, as REM sleep is important for their development. As children grow, they begin to sleep more deeply.

How much sleep does a child need?

Babies' sleep varies a lot. Most babies sleep for up to 18 hours over both day and night. As your baby grows, they will sleep more at night and less during the day. Babies often wake at night.

Toddlers and pre-schoolers sleep for around 11 to 14 hours each day. Most of their sleep occurs at night, but often they need a nap during the day as well. Primary school-age children need 10 to 11 hours of sleep a night.

Each child is different, and their needs may vary.

Why are good sleep habits important for my child?

Good sleep habits help your child get a good rest. Good sleep hygiene helps your child maintain their body clock to release melatonin, which helps them fall asleep more quickly.

A good sleep is important for developing:

concentration skills
learning skills
social skills

Without a good rest, your child may struggle with:

controlling their emotions and actions
focusing

A good quality sleep is when your child sleeps deeply enough and doesn't wake up too often for their age.

How can I help my child form healthy sleep habits?

Nutrition

Good nutrition can help your child get a good sleep. Where possible, try to time meals so your child isn't going to bed either hungry or too full, as this could make them uncomfortable.

Near bedtime, make sure your child avoids:

caffeine
soft drinks
chocolate
fatty food

Avoid feeding your child after bedtime.

Physical activity

Exercise can also help your child sleep well. Physical activity and play during the day helps your child use up energy, making them less likely to be restless at bedtime. Encourage your child to play outdoors - exposure to sunlight helps keep their body clock in sync, promoting better sleep.

Avoid daytime naps if your child is over 5 years old.

Wind-down time before bed

Relaxing before bedtime can help your child transition from playtime to sleep. Encourage quiet activities, such as:

- looking at books
- telling your child a story
- playing soft music

These activities can help them feel calm, relaxed, and sleepy.

For at least an hour before bedtime, avoid using electronics such as:

- television
- electronic devices
- mobile phones

Settling to sleep

When your child goes to bed, there are ways to help them settle to sleep:

- check your child is comfortable
- make sure it's quiet and dark
- remind your child to stay quietly in bed
- make sure your child has their toy or blanket if they usually sleep with one

Once you've left the room, try to stay away. If you go back in, your child may want you to return later, creating a habit for the following nights.

If your child gets out of bed:

- don't punish or scold them
- calmly but firmly take them back to bed
- don't offer food, conversation, or anything that your child might see as a reward

Ensure your child feels safe and relaxed in their sleep environment. Some

children may become upset if left alone in a dark room. If your child is upset, stay with them until they fall asleep. Letting them cry alone can lead to attachment issues. Comfort them by:

- leaving the door open
- using a nightlight

Different settling techniques work for different children. Some settle better with cuddles before bed. Choose an approach that suits you and your child, and if they are old enough, tell them what to expect at bedtime.

Bedtime routine

Most children fall asleep within 20 minutes of going to bed. Following a consistent bedtime routine can help your child link certain activities with sleep, such as:

- eating dinner
- wind-down time
- bathing
- cleaning teeth
- going to the toilet
- saying goodnight

Choose a bedtime routine that suits your household. Decide on the time for bed and wake-up. If your child misses a daytime nap, try to keep them up and put them to bed earlier.

Start the routine when it's convenient, but avoid starting it if you'll be away for a couple of nights or if your child is unwell.

If the routine doesn't fall into place immediately, keep trying - stay calm and firm, even if your child resists.

Resources and Support

Seek more information and tips on helping children get to sleep from trusted sources.

