

**PARENT SERIES**

University of Kansas, Clinical Child Psychology Program  
Parent Series Editor: Carolyn S. Schroeder, Ph.D., ABPP

## **Taking Charge of Your Child’s Sleep** *A Parent’s Guide to Sleep Hygiene, Habits and Patterns*

*Katrina M. Poppert Cordts, M.A. and Laurie A. Gayes, M.A*

Sleep is a multifaceted experience critical for learning, memory and emotional control. Sleep is the primary brain activity for infants. By age 2, most children have spent more time asleep than awake. On average, sleep consumes about 40 percent of a child’s day. The amount of sleep a child needs depends on the child’s developmental stage, since sleep patterns change as children age.

Inadequate sleep results from the difference between how much sleep a child needs, and how much sleep is actually gotten. Less sleep per night may be caused by increasingly later bedtimes, using electronics at night, and drinking caffeinated beverages during the day. Beyond poor sleep hygiene routines, about 25 percent of typically developing children experience inadequate sleep due to assorted sleep problems, including difficulty falling asleep, bedtime resistance and nighttime fears.

When children don’t get enough sleep, daytime sleepiness occurs. Children may say that they are feeling “sleepy” or “fuzzy.” Parents and caregivers may notice the child falling asleep at inappropriate times, such as in the car or at school. Daytime sleepiness affects children’s behavior, emotions, and academic performance. When children are sleepy, it’s harder for them to pay attention, to learn, and to be in a good mood. They are also at greater risk for unintentional injuries, such as accidents and falls.

### **Typical Amounts of Sleep at Different Ages**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Amount of Sleep</b>	<b>Sleep Periods</b>
Newborn	11-18 hours	45 minutes-3 hours
3-6 months	11-14 hours	8-10 hours/ night, 3- 4 hours/day
12 months-3 years	10-13 hours	9-10 hours/night, 1-3 hours/day
3-5 years	11-12 hours	1-2 hour nap or no naps
6-12 years	10-12 hours	No naps
13-18 years	9 hours	Some benefit from short afternoon nap

### **How to Know if Your Child is Getting the Proper Amount of sleep**

***Common indicators of insufficient sleep:***

- Difficult to rouse in the morning
- Has trouble staying awake during the day (falls asleep at school or other inappropriate times)
- Sleeps more than two hours longer on weekends or holidays than on weekdays
- Decreased ability to cope with stress (may seem excessively irritable or easily moody)
- Increased behavior problems
- Change in activity level (hyperactivity in young children; lethargy in teenagers)

## Sleep Hygiene and Bedtime Routines

Good sleep hygiene refers to behaviors that prepare children for bedtime and a restful night of sleep. Although many behaviors contribute to good sleep hygiene, the most important is maintaining the same sleep schedule with a consistent bed and wake time. Children should go to bed about the same time every night and should not sleep in more than one hour on weekends. Other factors include limiting a children's daily caffeine intake, engaging in plenty of daytime physical activity, and establishing the same sleep location every night. Similar to a consistent sleep schedule, establishing a bedtime routine is a critical component of good sleep hygiene. Bedtime routines help children know what to expect, and helps prepare their bodies for a good night's sleep.

Starting one hour before bedtime, children should engage in relaxing activities, such as reading, playing quietly, or taking a shower or bath. About 30 minutes before bedtime, children should begin a process that ends with them in their beds with their eyes closed. It is helpful to think about this process in three steps. During the first step, children engage in an activity that reminds them that it is almost time for bed. Some kids like a small snack and others like to say goodnight to their pets. During this step, it is a good idea for the child to use the restroom one more time before crawling into bed. The second step involves getting into bed and engaging in one final relaxing activity. Common activities include reading, writing in a journal, or talking about their favorite part of the day with their mom or dad. The most important part of this step is that electronics remain OFF. No cell phones, televisions, computers, or tablets allowed. The bedtime routine ends with the child finding a favorite sleeping position and closing eyes. Parents should turn off the lights and leave the room.

It's easy for parents to lose track of a child's bedtime routine while on vacation or when daily routines are disrupted. Routine disruptions and interruptions are often unavoidable, but there are several things parents can do to lessen the effect. While on vacation or when sleeping away from home, bring your child's favorite bedding and try to stick with the regular sleep schedule. Arranging travel during times when children normally sleep lets them sleep during the ride and stay on schedule. After a sleep-routine disruption, such as an overnight trip or special occasion causing a late bedtime, parents should immediately return to the sleep routine. If parents make exceptions or change the rules just one time, the child will likely believe that there are new sleep rules, and it will take longer to get back on schedule. Although it may take one or two nights to adjust, the child will go back to the original bedtime routine as long as it is consistently followed.

### Do's and Don'ts of Good Sleep Hygiene

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Maintain a consistent sleep schedule	Use electronics or play video games
Take a shower or bath	Drink caffeine
Read a good book	Schedule activities an hour before bed
Eat a small snack	Fall asleep in someone's bed or on the couch
Fall asleep in the same location	Have difficult or stressful conversations close to bedtime

### Example of a Bedtime Schedule

7:00 p.m.	Electronics off Take a bath
7:30 p.m.	Color a picture Put together a puzzle
8:00 p.m.	Eat a small snack Brush teeth
8:15 p.m.	Get in bed Listen to a book
8:30 p.m.	Lights off Goodnight!

### Common Sleep Issues by Age Group

Age Group	Common Sleep Issues	Recommendations to Promote Good Sleep
Infants and Babies	Difficulty self-soothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put the baby to bed drowsy but awake</li> <li>Leave the room after putting baby to bed</li> <li>Put baby to bed before 9 p.m.</li> </ul>
Toddler and Preschooler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many requests for attention at bedtime</li> <li>Resisting going to bed</li> <li>Nighttime fears</li> <li>Waking during the night</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leave the room after putting the toddler to bed</li> <li>Offer praise or simple rewards for going to bed easily and staying in bed all night</li> <li>Calmly acknowledge bedtime fears</li> <li>Provide soothing distractions to fears (books, nightlight, stuffed animal, white noise machine)</li> <li>Give the child minimal attention if they get out of bed during the night and calmly take them back to bed</li> </ul>
School-Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activities begin to interfere with bedtime</li> <li>Increased daytime sleepiness</li> </ul>	Adhere to appropriate bedtime
Teenager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activities often interfere with bedtime</li> <li>Significant daytime sleepiness</li> <li>Academic difficulties, increased moodiness, and risk-taking due to insufficient sleep</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limit late evening activities</li> <li>No technology after bedtime</li> <li>Avoid caffeine in afternoons and evenings</li> <li>Encourage exposure to natural light in the morning</li> <li>Limit daytime naps to 45 minutes</li> <li>Maintain a consistent sleep schedule (within 2 hours) every day of the week</li> </ul>

## **Strategies for Bedtime Struggles**

There are many reasons kids don't get enough sleep. Setting a consistent bedtime routine is the best way to help children develop good sleep schedules. Sometimes, though, children need additional strategies to help make bedtime a smooth process. Children may be fearful of the dark, or experience nightmares, which may prevent them from settling down at night. Other times, children develop habits that seem impossible to break, like needing one more drink of water, goodnight kiss, hug, or story. Try the following strategies when establishing a bedtime routine just isn't enough.

### **Encourage Self-Soothing in Infancy**

Good sleep habits start in infancy. If the baby is hungry or needs a diaper change at night, promptly attend to the baby and care for his or her needs. If the baby needs changing, parents should do so without engaging with them. For instance, avoid talking to or playing with the baby. After the baby is calm but when still awake, put the baby back in the crib and leave the room. It is best for babies to go to bed while still awake so that they learn to fall asleep independently. The use of a pacifier, or a transitional object (such as a soft toy or blanket), can help the baby settle and fall asleep without parent help. If the baby fusses or whimpers, wait a few minutes before reentering the room to let the baby self-soothe. If the baby is unable to soothe itself and becomes increasingly distressed, parents can briefly reenter the room. Parents are advised to comfort babies without picking them up. Instead, gently rub or pat their backs until they are calm. Repeat as needed while increasing the time before reentering the room.

### **Nothing Fun Happens After Dark**

One common mistake is to inadvertently "reward" children for getting up at night. When children get out of bed at night, common reactions include putting on movies for them, letting children get in bed with parents for snuggles, or offering a snack. However, this tells the child that fun things happen when they get out of bed at night. Instead, the message should be that the child's job is to sleep at night. To teach this, respond to night wakings with minimal attention. Remind children that it is time for sleeping and gently guide them back to bed. This is not the time for discussions or bargains. If children have trouble falling back asleep, they can read quietly and independently in bed, but should not get additional attention from parents, or access to electronics.

### **The Pass System**

The pass system gives the child three tickets, which can be taped to the bedroom door. Each ticket is an opportunity to call mom or dad to their room or to get out of bed. The tickets can be used for a hug, a tucking-in, a question, a drink, or using the restroom. After each visit or time out of bed, remove one ticket from the child's door. After all three tickets are gone, don't return to the child's bedroom when called. If called, or if the child gets up, tell the child to return to bed without responding to the question or request. Instead, say, "It's time for sleep."

Parents can make the pass system into a fun game for children. In the morning, the child can get a prize for each ticket not used during the night, or parents may let the child save tickets over the course of the week to earn a bigger prize. Get creative! Let the child decorate the tickets. Work with him or her to determine prizes that motivate the child to stay in bed at night without using the tickets.

### **Weaning Parent Attention**

Some children demand parental presence in their room as they are falling asleep. Some parents sleep with their child, which compromises both the child's and the parent's sleep quality. It is best for everyone if the child learns to fall asleep independently.

One option is to gradually wean parental attention at bedtime. If the parent is used to lying in bed with the child while the child falls asleep, a first small change would be to sit in a chair by the child's bed. The child might cry initially, but the parent should hold firm to the change. Once the child adjusts to this change, usually after about three nights, the parent can move the chair closer to the door. Again, the parent needs to hold firm, despite crying or distress from the child. Once the child adjusts to this change, the parent can move the chair to sit just outside the child's door. Lastly, the parent can say good night and leave the room entirely.

### **Overcoming Nighttime Fears**

Fear of the dark, monsters under the bed, or bumps in the night are relatively common in young children. Bedtime fears can be so impairing that they prevent children from going to sleep on time in their own beds. It is important for parents to help children identify the fear by asking open-ended questions. Rather than challenging the rationality of the fear or belittling it, parents should listen to their children and help them understand that it is normal to feel afraid sometimes.

Most importantly, parents should not play into the fear. Although looking under the bed and closing the closet door may seem like good strategies to calm an upset child, they reinforce the fear by giving it credibility. Instead, work with children to use their imaginations to overcome the fear. For instance, if a child is afraid of monsters, parents should encourage the child to draw silly monsters, sing a made-up monster song, and pretend to be a monster, too. Even when the fear seems unmanageable, encourage children to stay in their own beds to develop appropriate coping skills and learn to manage their fears independently. Finally, reward bravery! Parents should praise children for being brave even when scared.

### **Books for Parents and Children**

*Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems: New, Revised, and Expanded Edition (2006)* by Dr. Richard Ferber, Publisher: Fireside. In this book, Dr. Ferber provides recommendations for how to help children fall and stay asleep at night. He discusses the origin of sleep problems and helps parents identify strategies that work best for them.

*Sleeping Through the Night, Revised Edition: How Infants, Toddlers, and Their Parents Can Get a Good Night's Sleep (2005)* by Dr. Jodi A. Mindell (Recommended by the National Sleep Foundation), Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers. Dr. Jodi Mindell offers tips on bedtime, and helps family members cope when teaching a child to sleep. She provides case studies and quotes from parents who have successfully managed their children's sleep problems.

*What to Do When You Dread Your Bed: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Problems With Sleep (2008)* by Dawn Huebner, Publisher: Magination. This practical guide to overcoming sleep problems uses magic and kid-friendly language to give children the skills they need to sleep well at night.