

Sleep after the first year



Sleep helps children grow, learn and play, and boosts their immunity. How much children sleep and when changes as they get older.

Issues to do with falling asleep or waking up a lot are common and normal. They can be managed with positive strategies. If things aren't working as well as you would like the following information may help. This guide is for parents of children aged 12 months and older.



Positive strategies

Bedtime routine

Having a consistent bedtime routine will help your child sleep better and fall asleep more quickly. A bedtime routine can be started at any age and usually includes 3-4 calming activities. These can include:

- bathing or dressing for bed
- brushing teeth
- reading together
- cuddling with a favourite toy or blanket.

When you do these calming activities in the same order every night it makes your child feel safe and know what to expect.

Aim to stop screen time at least one to two hours before bedtime. Screens emit 'blue light' which can disrupt the hormone melatonin which helps with sleep.

Sleep environment

To help your child sleep well create a comfortable sleep environment. Ensure the room is cool and quiet. Avoid too much light or noise. Start dimming lights in the house when it's bedtime.

Feeling safe and loved

Emotional security is essential for better sleep. Spend quality time with your child before bedtime. Children sometimes want to stay up later to spend more time with their parents. Connecting with your child before bedtime helps them feel safe and loved.

Activities to try:

- get them to choose 1 or 2 books to read in bed together
- snuggle and chat, this is often when worries or fears surface. Listen and acknowledge their feelings
- quiet play with you before their bedtime routine. Just 15 minutes of child-led play can help them feel more connected
- gentle stroking or massage can reduce stress and help calm your child
- listen to music or a guided meditation
- avoid scary shows or games in the lead-up to bedtime.



Sleep challenges

- It is normal for children to resist bedtime due to fear, changes in routine or feeling unwell. Sometimes they are frightened of being left alone or are not tired enough.
- Sleep 'regressions' are normal when your child is growing, learning or feeling different things. They usually improve within 2-6 weeks. When children are more unsettled they may need you more.

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Stressful events can sometimes mean children need extra time before bed to relax. Reassuring words, a longer cuddle or calm music can help. Older children may talk to you about what's bothering them.

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Sleep Training

Many parents want to help their child sleep better and wonder if there is something they could - or should - be doing. Leaving children to cry themselves to sleep is not recommended because this does not teach them to calm down. Comfort your child when they need it. It is normal for children to wake during the night and need their parents. This helps them learn new sleep habits and boosts their confidence to sleep independently as they feel safe and secure.

Dummies

Parents who wish to use a dummy should only use it at sleep times and stop using it no later than 4 years for dental health.

Safe sleeping

Toddlers and children need to be safe while they sleep. They can get into dangerous situations and not be able to move out of them. They can also hurt themselves falling out of their cot or bed. Ensure a safe sleeping environment including a safe cot, mattress and bedding.

Bunk beds are not recommended for children under 9 years of age. Do not use a pillow under 2 years of age.

Moving from a cot to a bed

If your toddler is happy and safe in their cot there is no need to move to a bed. If it looks like they might climb out of their cot, it's time to move to a floor mattress, toddler bed or adult height bed.

It is important to make sure your home is safe. Children shouldn't be able to access power points, blinds, curtain cords or stairs. If they get up during the night they could hurt themselves. Ensure children cannot unlock and open doors to go outside.

Making changes to your child's sleep

Before trying any changes consider:

- is my child's sleep a problem for me or do I feel I should change something because of what others are telling me?
- does their sleep environment help them get to sleep?
- is my child getting plenty of active outdoor playtime?
- do they have a consistent, calm bedtime routine?

If you want to make changes to your child's sleep, very small, slow changes are usually best. Being consistent will give your child time to adjust.

Self-settling

All children learn to sleep longer and eventually through the night when they are developmentally ready. For some children this happens early. Others are not ready until they are 3-4 years old.

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The ability to sleep for longer periods is a developmental milestone that cannot be taught.

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Nightmares and night terrors

- Many children will have nightmares, night terrors or sleepwalk. These can worry parents but do not have any long-term effects on your child.
- There is often no clear reason why these things happen. Most children will grow out of them in time.
- They are more likely if children are stressed, unwell or not getting enough sleep.
- If nightmares or night terrors keep happening or you are worried, talk to your doctor.

Nightmares

Nightmares are scary dreams that can make children feel upset. Younger children might wake up thinking something bad has happened. As they get older they understand dreams aren't real.

What parents can do

If your child wakes from a nightmare make them feel safe by comforting them. You could also:

- stay with them until they go back to sleep
- leave their bedroom door open or a night light on
- talk with them calmly about the nightmare
- reduce daytime stress, eg if toilet training try putting it off for a while
- try using your child's imagination. Ask them to draw what is scaring them, and then screw it up and throw it away. This can give them a sense of power over their fears.

Night terrors and sleep walking

Night terrors and sleepwalking are a part of normal development and happen in healthy children. Your child won't remember when they wake up.

Night terrors are when a child becomes very agitated during deep sleep. They may last for a few minutes or up to 20 minutes. Night terrors are common. Most children outgrow them by puberty.

Your child may:

- thrash in bed, suddenly sit up, shout out, get up and run from the bed
- call for you but not 'see' you and cannot be comforted.

Sleepwalking often happens in the first few hours of the night during deep sleep.

Your sleepwalking child might:

- move about in their bed or walk around the house
- do simple tasks like setting the table or getting dressed
- try to talk, but the conversation probably won't make sense
- have their eyes open and a glassy stare
- let themselves out of the house and wander around outside.

What parents can do

- Ensure windows and doors are secure, remove tripping hazards.
- Leave your child asleep. The night terror will be over more quickly and they won't remember it. Nothing bad will happen if they do wake up.
- Stay with your child. Make sure they are safe. Guide them back to bed if needed.

Sleep 'starts'

Sleep 'starts' or 'jerks' are sudden jerks of the arms, legs or whole body at the beginning of sleep. These are common in people of all ages and the causes are unknown.

Sleep talking

Sleep talking is common. What children say may be clear or unclear and they may sit up when talking. They will not remember the next day. Try talking with them about their worries during the day.

Teeth grinding

Young children from about 10 months can grind their teeth. It usually doesn't cause any damage. This might happen due to stress or pain, eg earache or teething. Talk to your dentist if you are worried.



Toddlers 1-3 years

How much sleep?

From 12 months toddlers tend to sleep more at night and wake up less often. At this age most children will need between 10-14 hours sleep, including 1-3 hours of naps during the day. Some will need more, some will need less.

Night waking

Toddlers' brains grow a lot at this age. They may want to stay up with the family rather than going to bed. This is normal and will happen less as they grow older. They want to be independent but also get scared when they are separated from you.

Settling toddlers

Prepare your toddler for going to bed. Talk about what will happen next, eg having a bath, putting on pyjamas, cleaning teeth, reading a story, going to sleep. This reinforces the predictable bedtime pattern.

- Use the positive strategies on Page 1.
- Patting and rocking may still work at this age.
- If your child stands up in their cot sit on the floor or a low chair. This can encourage them to lie down.
- Try giving them a safe toy to cuddle.
- Some children need you to stay near while they go to sleep. It is important not to try and leave the room without telling them.
- If your child calls out you can call back so they know you are close.
- Make a special bedtime book. Write a short story (4-5 sentences) that explains what to do at bedtime. Draw or find pictures of each stage of their bedtime routine. Read the story every night and then do the things in the story. This helps your child learn the routine.

Children 3 years and over

How much sleep?

Many children of this age need 10 to 13 hours sleep. Some have a daytime nap as well, but only a few children still need this by preschool age.

Night waking

Children between the ages of 3 and 4 are still developing the inner confidence to feel secure when their parents are not around. Night waking due to separation anxiety improves as they get older.

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When children are unwell, feeling lonely, sad, or scared they may need extra support to fall asleep. Staying close to them, eg sleeping on a mattress in their room, can help them feel safe and calm.
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Settling ideas

Prepare your child for going to bed. Let them know in advance that bedtime is coming, eg 'Just one more game and then it's time to get ready for bed' and follow through with your plan.

- Use the positive strategies on Page 1.
- If your child gets out of bed gently lead them back and resettle them.
- If they wake at night go to them, comfort and quietly reassure them, eg 'Sleep time now, I love you'. You may need to return and repeat this.
- Offer to check on your child. If they know you will come back in five minutes, and then again in five more minutes, they are much more likely to be able to settle into sleep.
- Some parents allow their child into their bed in the early hours. Consider setting up a small bed next to yours for better sleep.
- If your child is scared at night ask them to draw what they're afraid of. You can help them talk to the monster, or whatever they draw, eg "No monsters allowed in my room. You have to sleep outside our house!"



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Ask your child what would help them sleep. Some children can tell you, others may not be able to.

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When to seek help

Sleep challenges are common and normal. It's important to seek help if:

- you're worried your child isn't getting enough sleep
- you're feeling anxious, depressed, helpless, angry or frustrated.

Or if your child:

- is very sleepy during the day despite seeming to have enough sleep time
- snores most nights, has pauses in breathing, chokes, gasps or snorts
- is restless and sweaty during sleep
- has uncontrolled eczema, allergies, reflux, sensory, breathing or feeding issues.

These can all impact sleep and need to be assessed by a health professional.

Want more information?

Helplines

Parent Helplines

Phone 1300 364 100, 7 days, 7.15am–9.15pm

Telephone information and support for parents of children aged 0-5. After 9.15pm your call will go through to the national Healthdirect helpline.

ForWhen Helpline SA

Phone 1300 242 322, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri

Connecting new and expecting parents struggling with their mental health to services that are right for them from conception to 12 months after birth

Services

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment Free service for children aged 0-5. Nurses can help with children's health, eating, sleeping and development www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA)

Phone Helpline 1300 726 306, 9am-7.30pm, Mon-Fri

Information, support and counselling to new parents, family and friends www.panda.org.au

Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 224 636, 24 hours

Phone and online support for anyone affected by anxiety or depression. www.beyondblue.org.au

Early Years SA App

Information on child health, learning, development and wellbeing from birth to 5 years. www.education.sa.gov.au/early-years-app

Red Nose

Phone 1300 998 698

For information and advice on safe infant sleeping and safe sleeping products www.rednose.com.au/
www.rednose.org.au/downloads/Cot_to_bed_brochure_for_families.pdf

Kidsafe SA

Phone 7089 8554, 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri Information on child safety www.kidsafesa.com.au

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission

Product Safety Australia

Information on safe products for babies and children, including safe cots and securing furniture www.productsafety.gov.au

Smiling Mind

Free mindfulness and guided meditation app for 3 years+ www.smilingmind.com.au/

Parenting

Raising Children Network

Parenting information on raising children, including sleep and child development www.raisingchildren.net.au/

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides and videos including 'Sleep in the first year', 'Bedwetting', 'Infant and child mental health', 'Learning to talk' and 'Growing and learning in the family', 'Sleep and screen use' and 'Managing screen time.' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.





**Government
of South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of
Human Services and Women's and
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www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended
to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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