



# Sleep matters

One in four families experience sleep problems. Gentle Sleep Coach, **Lucy Wolfe**, takes a look at some of the main reasons that cause sleeping problems and shares some tips that might help you and your baby get a good night's rest

**S**leeplessness and parenting go hand in hand. When you become a parent, you expect that your life will be different – very different – and most certainly you can expect to be awake at night for feeds and when your child is unwell or teething. However, there is a point when your waking baby should no longer be waking and you and your family should begin to enjoy solid stretches of sleep. If your baby or young child does not sleep well at night it has a knock-on effect for the whole family. You are tired and irritable and poor quality and quantity of sleep in older children has been linked to problems in learning, emotional development and growth, so helping your child to sleep by themselves is essential for everyone.

## Babies do sleep

Evidence suggests that a full-term healthy baby aged from six months is physically

capable of sleeping an 11-12 hour stretch at night without waking. So, as a parent, it is not unrealistic to expect that by nine months your full-term healthy baby "should" sleep through. In order to grow and develop well, their little bodies need on average 11-12 hours uninterrupted sleep at night, plus another two and a half to three hours nap time during the day. If this is not the case for your infant, understanding your child's sleep can often help parents to identify why they may be struggling with night-time waking, early rising or resisting daytime naps.

## Sleep patterns from 0-4 months

Children have an enormous need for sleep from the day that they are born and that then begins to evolve and mature over the next few months of life. By about four months they can begin to organise their sleep and, at the same time, their body

rhythms begin to mature as well. Parents of new babies should be encouraged to pay attention to their baby's sleep requirements, making efforts not to allow them to stay awake for more than 45 minutes – 1.5 hours at any stage: this will prevent them from becoming overtired and then impossible to settle to sleep.

## Daytime sleep

Daytime sleep has a huge impact on nighttime sleep, with well-napped children sleeping better at night. Children who are operating in sync with their internal body clock inevitably find it easier to fall asleep and to stay asleep, as they are tuning into their natural sleep windows and optimum go-to-sleep time. In the event that a child is not on a consistent schedule or one that echoes his natural body rhythms, they can become over-tired and the stress hormone, cortisol, gets introduced to their bodies, making it harder for them to go to sleep and to stay asleep. It is this hormone that

gives rise to babies getting the well-recognised "second wind".

From around four months, children's sleep begins to resemble that of adults, with only one qualitative difference; about a quarter of their sleep is represented by REM (rapid eye movement) and the rest non-REM. They alternate between the two states in what we refer to as sleep cycles. As sleep passes through the cycles, they will experience a "partial arousal" when they are close to being awake. These partial arousal phases can occur within 3-4 hours of falling asleep at bedtime and at various other stages during the night and within 10-30 minutes of falling asleep during daytime sleep. It is during these partial waking stages that they may be looking for their parents to help get them back to sleep.

## Teaching sleep

Sleep disturbances in infants and children manifest in many ways. Sleep, like talking, is a learned behaviour. Your routine and behaviour at bedtime and especially your response to your child's nighttime awakenings play a big part in establishing your child's sleep patterns. Your child must learn how to put him or herself to sleep at bedtime and then learn how to get back to sleep when they come into the partial arousal stages of light sleep throughout the night. Unfortunately, children become used to the parent "doing" something for them in order to get them to sleep (for example, feeding, rocking or patting their back) and then are unable to go back to sleep by themselves during the night. This is where the broken sleep patterns begin as the parent is needed to help them to get back to sleep.



# Sleep tips for parents

You can begin to gently shape your babies sleep from about 12 weeks old without compromising your parental values. It is useful to not always feed your baby when they are going to sleep but upon waking sometimes as well.

You can establish soothing techniques other than feeding, such as swaddling, shushing or swaying. At least once a day you should try to let your baby fall asleep unassisted. It is also very important that your baby gets the right amount of sleep during the day. These small habits can help your baby have the right sleep start and foster healthy sleep hygiene from very early on.

If your baby is older and is already used to being helped to sleep, you will need to address your responses to their waking and provide a new, consistent approach to sleep, retraining bad habits.

## Some simple tips you can try are outlined below:

- **Have an age-appropriate bedtime**  
Some time between 7pm - 8pm is a natural bedtime for a young child. Although this doesn't always fit in with our modern lifestyle, efforts should be made to ensure that the time your child goes to bed is appropriate to what your child's body actually needs. Missing your child's sleep window can make it hard for them to go asleep and to stay asleep.
- **Learn to identify your child's sleep cues**  
Parents need to be able to identify their children's tired signals, such as yawning, rubbing eyes or zoning out. These signals will help you to identify the natural sleep window for your child when it will be easiest for them to fall asleep.
- **Establish a relaxing bedtime routine**  
Establish a sequence of events that are focused on helping your child to relax, wind down and get ready for sleep. Instead of doing something to put them to sleep like rocking, nursing, or walking them to sleep, create a consistent bedtime routine, ideally in the child's bedroom with dimmed lights that will enhance your child's relaxing and sleep hormones (oxytocin and melatonin), making it easier for them to fall asleep by themselves.
- **Create a peaceful sleeping environment**  
The room your child sleeps in should be adequately dark, without bright external lights that can affect the sleep

hormone even while sleeping. Remove any distractions, disturbing pictures or images and mirrors.

- **Put your child to bed more awake than asleep**  
This will allow your child to learn how to fall asleep on their own. Stay close to them and be emotionally, physically and verbally responsive to them while they perfect the skill of falling asleep.
- **Try to avoid nighttime feeds once they are no longer necessary**  
Feeding throughout the night may result in a persistent requirement for night feeds with conditioned hunger, increased wetting and recurrent night-time waking. Ask your GP or health nurse's advice with regard to dropping feeds.
- **Be consistent in your responses during the night**  
An inconsistent response during the night will result in frequent night-time waking. Changing your child's sleeping location throughout the night, lying down with them, sometimes feeding them, sometimes allowing them to play when they should be asleep, will confuse them and ingrain nighttime activity.
- **Ensure adequate daytime sleep appropriate for your child's age**  
Parents often are not sure how much sleep their baby should have during the day - here's a general guide:  
**6-12 months:** Nap for 2.5 - 3 hours per day  
**12-18 months:** Nap for 2.25 - 2.5 hours per day  
**18-24 months:** Nap for 2 ¼ hours per day  
**2 years:** 2 hours per day  
**3 years:** 1.5 hours per day



## Lucy Wolfe

is a Certified Paediatric Sleep Consultant and owner of **Sleep Matters - Help Your Child To Sleep**. Lucy helps

families that are struggling with sleep issues from newborn to six years old, offering a gentle approach to get children to sleep, without using controlled crying techniques. Lucy offers personal consultations, telephone/Skype consultations, workshops and Parent Sleep Craft classes.

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