



Sleep tight

Is your toddler unsettled at night or getting up at the crack of dawn? Behavioural sleep problems are common but they can be corrected

By LUCY WOLFE



Toddler Sleep

Children's sleep can be a big source of frustration for parents, there are so many variables and so much conflicting advice, it can be difficult to figure out the way forward. Although there is a huge amount of variability with regards when your baby should sleep through the night, there does come a point, where without a doubt, your toddler, not only should be sleeping through the night, he needs to.

Good quality sleep is necessary for our children to simply to function at their optimum—emotionally, physically and developmentally. Like we do, children feel the adverse effects of broken, interrupted and not enough sleep and it can have a compromising impact on mood, cognition, behaviour, immune system, growth, development and overall ability.

When you are parenting a young child it is reasonable to expect periods of time when the sleep is disturbed; teething, sickness, developmental milestones, separation anxiety, change in care givers, change in familial dynamics—loss of a loved one, new baby, new house, for example, can all contribute to periods of broken sleep.

However, if your child is generally a good sleeper, with a consistent response from you during these times, being both emotionally and physically responsive

Lucy's Top Sleep Tips for Toddlers

You can try to gradually phase out associations that require your intervention at sleep times

- Make sure that your child is getting enough sleep during the day time
- Recognise your child's natural bedtime by watching their sleep signals - typically between 7 to 8pm
- Avoid being inconsistent. Have a response plan for when your child wakes.
- Be loving and responsive but don't create sleeping associations that prevent your child from falling asleep unassisted



to your child, they will gently slip back into their usual sleeping pattern, when they are able.

It is difficult for us as parents to try to deal with a child who is wakeful during the night, especially when all you want to do is go back to sleep yourself or are counting how many hours before the alarm clock will go off. That is a natural thought process, but if you can remain calm, avoid changing the sleeping location, giving your child mixed messages and biologically unnecessary feeds, you will avoid ingraining long term behavioural sleep problems.

There are some children though, that do have sleeping issues that are ongoing

and go beyond short periods of sickness, teething and developmental milestones. Where they wake during the night without fail, or refuse to go to sleep at bed and nap time, or need Mum or Dad to help them fall asleep. Don't despair. Although sleep problems are "common" they do not have to be endured.

Due to the behavioural nature of sleep, outside of underlying medical conditions, the sleeping disturbances can be corrected and everyone can start to get consolidated sleep. Parents often feel that they will need to leave their child to "cry it out" to get them to sleep, but actually crying and sleep have nothing to do with each other. Your child does not need to cry to go to sleep, but if you are



attempting to correct a sleep problem, you will probably have to make some changes to how you do things and then your child may cry because they find the change difficult.

We all find change difficult, but whilst they adjust to the changes, you do not necessarily need to leave them alone – you could stay with them whilst they adjust to the new way of doing things.

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Mum's Questions Answered

Last month, Lucy logged on Pregnancy & Parenting's Facebook page to give expert advice to our parents' sleep-related queries.

Plenty of toddler-related sleep problems came up so if you are struggling, you definitely are not alone.



I have a 3 year old who was a great sleeper until a couple of months ago. He now wakes about three times a night. He does not nap during the day anymore, he may get 30 minutes in the car, but he is so tired by bedtime that he is asleep

by 7.45pm. We just can't seem to get him out of the pattern of waking up at night. Can you give me some suggestions to help get him back to sleeping all night? Lesley.

How much sleep should my 10 month old be getting? Alan

Your baby's body is designed to sleep for about 11 hours straight at night with about three hours required during the day, divided into two naps: the first in the morning within about two hours of waking and the second within about three hours of waking. It's a good idea to watch your child for obvious sleep signals such as yawning and rubbing their eyes. This is the perfect time for your child to go to sleep, the hormones in their body and their body temperature are right for sleep. This makes it easier for them to go asleep at these times and to stay asleep for longer.

My two year old is showing signs of climbing out of the cot - should I move him to a bed? Riah

Riah, I normally don't suggest transitioning from cot to bed until at least two and a half years to three and see nothing wrong with a four year old still in a cot. At least by the middle of their second year, developmentally your child has the skill set that you can reason with and explain that you would like him to stay "in his bed all night". Some active children do attempt to climb out of the cot (one of my own four children was inclined to launch himself out). Some of my clients like a cot tent that secures to the cot to make a "house", which tots are unable to climb out of. Some parents don't like the idea of that so I normally suggest that whatever they decide, they observe safety and have boundaries with their toddlers' behaviour in staying in bed, and follow through with these boundaries.

Lesley, I feel your pain, especially when you know what good sleep looks and feels like... there are a few components here. To begin, you need to ensure that he can go to sleep by himself. This means without a bottle, hand holding, parent lying down with him. Also, he may still need his day sleep and the nighttime waking is a result of being over tired during the day. I can't emphasise enough, how day sleep can negatively and positively impact on nighttime sleep. The fact that he falls asleep in the car demonstrates that he may still need daytime sleep. Maybe not every day but perhaps every other day or so. If you see him tired during the centre of the day I would recommend that he has a sleep of about one to one and a half hours, but even 30 minutes may help. In the absence of daytime sleep, I would be inclined to bring his bedtime forward if he is shattered; evidence suggests that a more rested child during the day and at bedtime results in fewer nocturnal wakings. You then need to consider what motivates him to wake. He has a learned response to how you deal with him over the night period. Unnecessary nighttime drinks, trips to the bathroom, a kiss on the forehead, rearranging the blankets, allowing him into your bed can all reinforce nighttime activity. Remember habits in the behavioural context of sleep can be formed within one to three days.

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