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children and naps

Naps during the day can help a baby or child sleep at night. Even if your child sleeps well at night, they still need morning and afternoon naps until they are around two and a half to three years old. Try to settle your child for a nap before they become too overtired and agitated to relax.

On average, a young baby needs around 14 to 15 hours of sleep over a 24-hour period, but this can vary from one child to the next.

Newborns and young babies often become drowsy while they are feeding. Babies aged six months and over are less inclined to fall asleep while feeding. They may also learn how to keep themselves awake and parents may have to devise new strategies to help their older baby relax and go to sleep.

Toddlers need, on average, around 10 to 12 hours sleep per night, and still need daytime naps. A child's sleeping routine at night can be severely disrupted if they don't get enough sleep during the day, or if their afternoon nap is too close to bedtime.

Signs of tiredness

Try to settle your child for a nap before they become too overtired and agitated to relax. The signs of tiredness in children of various ages include:

Newborns – staring, jerky movements of the arms and legs, clenched fists, frowning, yawning, irritated behaviour including crying.

Older babies – loss of interest in toys or playing, fretfulness, yawning, separation anxiety, irritated behaviour including crying, eye rubbing, a change in physical activity (more or less activity).

Toddlers – clumsy physical movements, tasks take longer to perform, irritated behaviour including crying, emotional tension.

You need a combination of two to three tired signs, not just one.

Insufficient sleep causes problems

Children of all ages need adequate sleep and rest. Babies may have trouble feeding properly or finishing their feeds if they are tired. Older babies and toddlers may be more difficult to handle, since tiredness often translates into crankiness and tears.

Even if your child sleeps well at night, they still need a morning and or afternoon nap until at least around the age of two and a half to three years, sometimes four.

How daytime can affect night-time

Your child's night-time sleeping habits may be disrupted by their daytime naps. For example, if they don't sleep during the afternoon, you may find they are too tired to eat their evening meal. As they are so tired, you put them to bed early. However, if they wake in the early hours of the morning, it is difficult to know if it is from habit or hunger.

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Why some children resist sleep

Some of the reasons why older babies and toddlers may not want to take a nap include:

- They don't want to be by themselves.
- They don't want to miss out on any activity.
- They are too excited, restless or anxious and can't relax.
- Their daytime routine doesn't always include naps.
- They are hungry or thirsty, or have some other physical discomfort.

Suggestions for daytime naps

Suggestions to help your child to settle for a nap include:

- Make sure your child has plenty of fresh air and physical activity.
- Establish a routine so the child expects to have a nap at certain times.
- Give your child time to relax beforehand with gentle activities. Perhaps read them a story.
- Make sure they are comfortable, fed and wearing a fresh nappy.
- Provide your child with an opportunity to settle themselves. Then, if they are anxious without you, stay in the room for a few minutes.

After 12 months some children may be comforted by a special object or toy. However, first check recommendations for safe sleeping and avoiding SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome).

Leave their bedroom door open so they can hear you moving around the house.

Even if they don't nap, the rest is still beneficial. Put them in a darkened and quiet room. Children of all ages need adequate sleep and rest. A child's sleeping routine at night can be disrupted if they don't get enough sleep during the day. Even if your child sleeps well at night, they still need morning and/or afternoon naps until at least around the age of two and a half to three years, sometimes four.

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