

 PARENTING RESOURCE

Sleep Struggles? We've Got Resources

By Sarah S. MacLaughlin

Some parents say that their children “just slept well from the start.” Or that they learned to fall asleep fairly easily with parent support. And then there’s the rest of us.



Sleep is one of the first, and most challenging, issues that many parents face. A blog post can't possibly address or solve all the complex challenges parents encounter around sleep. Instead, here we focus on ways to establish healthy sleep habits from the start—to hopefully prevent situations like a baby who won't fall asleep unless fed, held, or rocked; a toddler who comes into your room for a visit at 3:00 a.m.; or a 2-year-old whose bedtime routine is now 75 minutes long and getting longer every night.

Ways to Nurture Healthy Sleep Habits from the Start

1. Put yourself in your child's shoes.

For babies and young children, bedtime can be a stressful experience, especially if it means separating from the people they love, and ending other fun activities (Baths! Stories! Songs!). It

also means going to sleep, perhaps alone, in a darkened room, which can be scary. When you're exhausted and frustrated, it can be hard to look at things from your child's perspective. But learning to fall back to sleep in the middle of the night is a hard skill for many children to master. Despite all evidence to the contrary, your children are not trying to drive you crazy or manipulate you. Most of all, they need your patience and support to learn this new skill.



"(My daughter) will be very obviously tired, but won't let go and just go to sleep."

—Kelly in Greensboro, North Carolina

2. Take good care of yourself.

Don't skimp on self-care—keep your well-being at the top of your to-do list. This doesn't mean weekend getaways and trips to the spa. It means making sleep a priority when you can, such as going to bed earlier and letting go of tasks that can wait. Your need for sleep is as important as your baby's. You matter! You'll have more patience if you take care of yourself too.

3. Tune in to your unique child's needs.

Every child is wired differently and has a different capacity for self-soothing, which means that there is a wide range of behavior in the sleep department. So avoid comparing what your child is doing to others. Don't fall prey to the "shoulds." Tune in to what your child is telling you through his behavior and let that be your guide. For example, you might find that your baby needs more time to transition from playtime to sleep, to help his body get into a more relaxed state, so the bedtime routine may need to be longer and more gradual.

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Questions to Ask When Helping Children Learn to Sleep

- **Does the environment say “Sleep”?**

Pay attention to your child’s sleep environment and bedtime routines. Is it adequately dark? Are toys covered or put away to reduce distractions? Is it fairly quiet? Is the TV off? If there is a nightlight, is it very dim? (Some recommend red as the best color to use [↗](http://www.sci-news.com/othersciences/neuroscience/science-night-light-color-mood-01333.html) (<http://www.sci-news.com/othersciences/neuroscience/science-night-light-color-mood-01333.html>)). It also helps to have a predictable sleep routine your child can count on each night—such as bath, tooth-brushing, story, and special goodnight kiss—to cue your child that it’s time for sleep.

- **How do you help your child prepare for bedtime?**

Let your child know when bedtime is approaching. Put on a timer to help your child prepare for the transition 5 minutes before it’s time to go to bed. It can also be helpful to create a ritual that signals a change, such as having your child “help” you switch off the light when it’s time get into bed. Creating a visual reminder of the bedtime routine can also work. Take photos of each step of your routine (bath, tooth-brushing, story, etc.) and put them up on the wall in your child’s room in order. Then point out the steps each night as you do them. Each of these strategies helps children begin to understand what will happen next, which can make bedtime easier.

“(My son) goes to sleep by himself for his naps but he does not at night and if I get up he will wake up after half an hour and I have to lay with him again.”

—Sue in Costa Rica

- **What helps a child who has trouble separating at night-time?**

Experiment with routines that help to ease separations: Try a stuffed toy or blanket as a transition object (for children 1-year-old and above); promise to come back and check in after 3 minutes for a last good-night kiss; or record yourself singing lullabies...switch them on as you leave the room. As a final send-off for older children, decide where the two of you might go during dreamtime that night, "Should we meet at the beach in our dreams? I will see you there."

- **How do you set clear but gentle limits?**

Be clear about the rules and expectations around sleep. Children whose parents establish and follow through on clear bedtime routines tend to learn to be good sleepers. Parents set the stage by making the expectations clear, "After bath, we will read three books, I will sing you a lullaby, give you our special kiss, and will say goodnight. Then I will see you in the morning." Many young children use stalling tactics to delay bedtime—asking for snacks, water, and "just one more book." When that happens, parents can matter-of-factly remind children of the routine ("We read our books and we sang our song. Now it's time for bed. Do you want 1 kiss or 2 kisses?") and stick to it.

Tweetable Takeway

Bedtime is the biggest transition and separation of the day
—that's why it can be hard for parents and their little ones.

#ParentForward

TEXT=BEDTIME%20IS%20THE%20BIGGEST%20TRANSITION%20OF%20THE%20DAY%2C%20MAKING%20IT%20HARD%200566-1701%2F-%2FL-TS

About Baby Steps

This article was featured in *Baby Steps*, a ZERO TO THREE newsletter for parents and caregivers. Each issue offers science-based information on a topic of interest to parents and caregivers of young children—from sleep to challenging behaviors, and everything in between.

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