

Eight sleep tips for every child

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Up to 70% of children under age five have sleep problems. Sleep issues are complicated and have many causes. They're hard to deal with because when children aren't sleeping, parents aren't sleeping, and that lack of sleep affects every minute of every day for every person in the family because lack of sleep isn't just about being tired. Sleep has a role in everything -- dawdling, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, growth, health, and even learning to tie his shoes and recite the ABCs. Sleep affects everything.

The following ideas are of value to almost any sleeper, of any age. These tips can bring improvement not only in your child's sleep, but also in her daytime mood and last, but not least – improvements in your own sleep and outlook as well.

1 A consistent bedtime and awaking time.

Your child's biological clock has a strong influence on her wakefulness and sleepiness. When you establish a set time for bedtime and wake up time you "set" your child's clock so that it functions smoothly.

Aim for an early bedtime. Young children respond best with a bedtime between 6:30 and 7:30 P.M. Most children will sleep better and longer when they go to bed early.

2 Encourage regular daily naps.

Daily naps are important. An energetic child can find it difficult to go through the day without a rest break. A nap-less child will often wake up cheerful and become progressively fussier or hyper-alert as the day goes on. Also, the length and quality of naps affects night sleep – good naps equal better night sleep.

3 Set your child's biological clock.

Take advantage of your child's biology so that he's actually tired when bedtime arrives. Darkness causes an increase in the release of the body's sleep hormone -- the biological "stop" button. You can align your child's sleepiness with bedtime by dimming the lights during the hour before bedtime.

Exposing your child to morning light is pushing the "go" button in her brain — one that says, "Time to wake up and be active." So keep your mornings bright!

4 Develop a consistent bedtime routine.

Routines create security. A consistent, peaceful bedtime routine allows your child to transition from the motion of the day to the tranquil state of sleep.

An organized routine helps you coordinate the specifics: bath, pajamas, tooth-brushing. It helps you to function on auto-pilot at the time when you are most tired and least creative.

5 Create a cozy sleep environment.

Where your child sleeps can be a key to quality sleep. Make certain the mattress is comfortable, the blankets are warm, the room temperature is right, pajamas are comfy, and the bedroom is welcoming.

6 Provide the right nutrition.

Foods can affect energy level and sleepiness. Carbohydrates can have a calming effect on the body, while foods high in protein or sugar generate alertness, particularly when eaten alone. A few ideas for pre-bed snacks are: whole wheat toast and cheese, bagel and peanut butter, oatmeal with bananas, or yogurt and low-sugar granola.

Vitamin deficiencies due to unhealthy foods can affect a child's sleep. Provide your child with a daily assortment of healthy foods.

7 Help your child to be healthy and fit.

Many children don't get enough daily physical activity. Too much TV watching and a lack of activity prevents good sleep. Children who get ample daily exercise fall asleep more quickly, sleep better, stay asleep longer, and wake up feeling refreshed.

Avoid activity in the hour before bedtime though, since exercise is stimulating – they'll be jumping on the bed instead of sleeping in it!

8 Teach your child how to relax.

Many children get in bed but aren't sure what to do when they get there! It can help to follow a soothing pre-bed routine that creates sleepiness. A good pre-bed ritual is story time. A child who is listening to a parent read a book or tell a tale will tend to lie still and listen. This quiet stillness allows him to become sleepy.

Work with these eight ideas and you'll see improvements in your child's sleep, and yours too.

Excerpted with permission by McGraw-Hill Publishing from The No-Cry Sleep Solution for Toddlers & Preschoolers (McGraw-Hill 2005)
