

How to help your baby's sleep

(age 6 months or older)



by Vanessa Campion
Health Visitor and OBS Volunteer

Establishing good sleep hygiene

Sleep hygiene is about establishing daily routines and practices that can make sleep more likely to occur. The bedroom environment is also an important part of sleep hygiene.

WHY IS THIS A GOOD IDEA?

What goes on during the day - as well as at bedtime - can help encourage your baby's developing sleeping patterns.

Sometimes it is all that is needed if a parent feels their child's sleep is more disrupted than normal.



DOES IT MEAN MY BABY WILL SLEEP THROUGH THE NIGHT?

Not necessarily. Sleep is a developmental process that develops over time and the pace of this development is not the same for everyone. However, good sleep hygiene can help prepare a baby for the sleep that they are ready for, depending on their age and stage of development. This leaflet contains suggestions that you might find helpful, but it is not intended to be prescriptive, and if something doesn't feel right for your family, just take from this what works for you.

DOES IT MEAN MAKING BIG CHANGES?

Not necessarily. Taking small steps and making minor adjustments is likely to be the most realistic approach for most families.





Sleep hygiene tips

1

Have a predictable wake up and bedtime.

2

Expose your child to natural daylight.

3

Look for patterns in your child's nap rhythm.

4

Consider a pre-nap routine.

5

Give your child the opportunity for physical exercise.

6

Offer your child a balanced diet.

7

Before you start your bedtime routine, have some playtime and then wind down.

8

Have a predictable, soothing bedtime routine.

9

Create the optimal bedroom environment.



Tip 1: Have a predictable wake up and bedtime



Why?

A predictable bedtime can help to regulate your baby's natural rhythm. Big differences in the times a baby starts and ends the day can affect their biological rhythm (e.g. if one day starts at 6am and the next day starts at 8am). This is likely to mean that nap times will also vary considerably, and have a knock-on effect at bedtime, making it more difficult to settle.

Aim to make wake up time and bed time roughly the same each day. Flexibility is important too though, so go with what works for your family day to day.

References:

Rivkees, S.A., 2003. *Developing circadian rhythmicity in infants. Pediatrics*, 112(2), pp.373-381.

Tip 2: Expose your child to natural daylight



Why?

Being exposed to natural daylight really helps a baby's circadian rhythm. The "body clock" which controls our sleep and waking patterns is affected by light.

If you can (weather permitting!), get outside for at least 30 minutes a day, especially in the morning. This can aid sleep and production of Vitamin D too!

References:

Bedrosian, T.A. and Nelson, R.J., 2017. Timing of light exposure affects mood and brain circuits. Translational psychiatry, 7(1), pp.e1017-e1017.

Rivkees, S.A., 2007. The development of circadian rhythms: from animals to humans. Sleep medicine clinics, 2(3), pp.331-341.

Tip 3: Look for patterns in your child's nap rhythm.

Why?



A "contact nap"

From the age of 6 months, naps can become more predictable for a while. Some children will nap for long periods and others only manage a series of 30 minute naps, **both of which are normal**. Ideally, naps need to be well spaced during the day so that children are neither overtired at bedtime nor not tired enough. Most children up to the age of 2.5-3 years need naps. Note that the amount of daytime sleep decreases as your baby matures, and so the number of naps (and timings) will also alter.

If your little one's naps are a bit of a mystery, try observing them for tired signs and make a note of the time over a few days. If a pattern is emerging, use this as a guide for when your child's naps are most likely to occur.

Try to facilitate a nap in whatever way works, e.g. "contact nap" or getting out for a walk with your baby in a sling or pushchair.



References:

Weissbluth, M., 2015. Healthy sleep habits, happy child: A step-by-step program for a good night's sleep. Ballantine Books.

Tip 4: Consider a pre-nap routine



Why?

Your child relies on you to signal to them what is happening next in their day. A pre-nap routine some 20 minutes before the expected nap time might help prepare your child for sleep. The routine will be a much shorter one than the bed time one. It may only need 3 steps to it, such as getting into their sleeping bag, a story, and a feed.

References:

Mindell, J.A., Telofski, L.S., Wiegand, B. and Kurtz, E.S., 2009. A nightly bedtime routine: impact on sleep in young children and maternal mood. Sleep, 32(5), pp.599-606.

Tip 5: Give your child the opportunity for physical exercise

Why?



Physical exercise aids sleep as it makes a child feel more tired. It also gives them the opportunity to practice new skills...and perhaps prevent them from wanting to practice them at night! 30 minutes of fairly active exercise every day has been found to have a positive effect on sleep.^{1, 2}

If you are struggling with naps then giving your child the chance to exercise before a nap may make the settling for a nap easier.

References:

1: Tremblay, M.S., Carson, V., Chaput, J.P., Connor Gorber, S., Dinh, T., Duggan, M., Faulkner, G., Gray, C.E., Gruber, R., Janson, K. and Janssen, I., 2016. Canadian 24-hour movement guidelines for children and youth: an integration of physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, 41(6), pp.S311-S327.

2: Allen, S.L., Howlett, M.D., Coulombe, J.A. and Corkum, P.V., 2016. ABCs of SLEEPING: A review of the evidence behind pediatric sleep practice recommendations. *Sleep medicine reviews*, 29, pp.1-14.

Tip 6: Offer your child a balanced diet



Why?

Having a varied diet is so important to your child's health, development, and sleep.¹

Eating fresh, unprocessed foods is also important.²

Processed foods contain colouring, sweeteners, and additives which can affect their sleep.³

Make the timings of the meals consistent as it helps to regulate their biological rhythm.⁴

References:

1. Grandner, M.A., Jackson, N., Gerstner, J.R. and Knutson, K.L., 2013. Dietary nutrients associated with short and long sleep duration. Data from a nationally representative sample. *Appetite*, 64, pp.71-80.
2. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org>
3. https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TSC-Advice-Sheets_Diet-Sleep_Online.pdf
4. Asher, G. and Sassone-Corsi, P., 2015. Time for food: the intimate Interplay between nutrition, metabolism, and the circadian clock. *Cell*, 161(1), pp.84-92.

Tip 7: Before you start the bedtime routine, have some playtime and then wind down

Why?

After the evening meal allow some playtime. This is a good idea especially if your child has not had the chance for any physical activity. This will help them to burn off some energy.



Then, about 30 minutes before the start of the bedtime routine, turn the lights down, speak in a quiet voice, and help your little one calm down. You could try reading a book with them. Calming them down helps to reduce the activity hormone cortisol and relaxes them more.¹

NB: Try to limit exposure to screens 1-2 hours before bedtime as the light from screens can inhibit the secretion of the sleep hormone melatonin.²

References:

1. Buckley, T.M. and Schatzberg, A.F., 2005. On the interactions of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and sleep: normal HPA axis activity and circadian rhythm, exemplary sleep disorders. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 90(5), pp.3106-3114.
2. Czeisler, C.A., 2013. Perspective: casting light on sleep deficiency. *Nature*, 497(7450), pp.S13-S13.

Tip 8: Have a predictable, soothing bedtime routine

Why?

A predictable, soothing bedtime routine that is done in the same order every night has been proven to improve sleep.

The aim is to prepare your child for the night.



It only needs to have 3-4 steps in it, aiming for them to be done in the same order every night.

The length of the routine does not need to be any longer than 30 minutes.

It is up to you to choose the steps you want in the routine, just as long as they relax and calm your child.

If you are finding it is taking a long time to settle your little one for the night it may mean you need to adjust the actual bedtime.

References:

Mindell, J.A., Telofski, L.S., Wiegand, B. and Kurtz, E.S., 2009. A nightly bedtime routine: impact on sleep in young children and maternal mood. Sleep, 32(5), pp.599-606.

Tip 9: Create the optimal bedroom environment

Why?

Sleep is optimised when the bedroom has these following components:

Light exposure has an effect on sleep.¹ Darkness aids sleep, but light exposure inhibits the rise of the sleep hormone melatonin, which can delay the onset of sleep, and sleep itself. If you use a night light make sure it is a red light as this will not affect melatonin secretion.



Black out blinds are very useful at making the bedroom dark. They are especially useful during late spring and summer when it can start to get light at 4.30 am.

Noise: Noise can stimulate your child, especially if they are sensitive to noise. Using 'pink noise' has been found to positively affect sleep.² It works by reducing the difference between the background hum and sudden loud noises. It is best to play the noise continuously during the night and not to have it right next to the bed.

If you are worried that your baby will always need pink noise, simply decrease the sound gradually over time.

What is pink noise?

Pink noise is background noise with a lower frequency than 'white noise', often found in the natural world, like rain or a waterfall.

Temperature: this plays a big part in sleep hygiene.³ The Lullaby Trust recommends that the ideal temperature is between 16-20 C. If a child has eczema a slightly cooler temperature of 16-18 C helps to prevent itchiness that can be caused by warmer temperatures.



Clothing: Clothing and bedding made from cotton is preferable as it has a smooth feel and it helps to keep moisture away from the skin. Body temperature naturally drops at around 4am so if you have an active sleeper you may want to consider putting them in a sleeping bag or putting socks on them at night, so they don't get too cold which could trigger an early wake up. Studies have shown wearing socks seems to enhance sleep.⁴

References:

1. Bedrosian, T.A. and Nelson, R.J., 2017. Timing of light exposure affects mood and brain circuits. *Translational psychiatry*, 7(1), pp.e1017-e1017.
2. Zhou, J., Liu, D., Li, X., Ma, J., Zhang, J. and Fang, J., 2012. Pink noise: effect on complexity synchronization of brain activity and sleep consolidation. *Journal of theoretical biology*, 306, pp.68-72.
3. Lack, L.C., Gradisar, M., Van Someren, E.J., Wright, H.R. and Lushington, K., 2008. The relationship between insomnia and body temperatures. *Sleep medicine reviews*, 12(4), pp.307-317.
4. Ko, Y. and Lee, J.Y., 2018. Effects of feet warming using bed socks on sleep quality and thermoregulatory responses in a cool environment. *Journal of physiological anthropology*, 37(1), pp.1-11.