



Coping with Sleep Challenges

Learning to fall asleep—and stay asleep—are skills that your child will use his whole life. Using the following are strategies can help you nurture good sleeping habits in your baby or toddler right from the start.

To Think About

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the questions below can help you apply this information to your own child:

- Have you noticed any trends or patterns in your child's sleep challenges? If so, what are they? How might this information help you understand and address the problem?
- What have you tried in responding to your child's sleep challenges? What has worked? What hasn't worked? Why do you think that might be?

What You Can Do

Read below about ways to help your child learn to fall asleep (and fall *back* to sleep) beginning from the earliest months of life.

Keep it routine. Loving, relaxing bedtime routines help babies learn when it's time to go to sleep. Having a bedtime routine means doing the same thing—as much as possible—every time you put your baby down to sleep. Families will have different routines based on their culture and the needs of their individual child.

Read the signs. Watch for the ways your baby lets you know he is tired. Yawning is the most obvious hint, but there are others, too. Your baby may have a certain sleepy cry, may pull on his ear, rub his eyes, or be fussy. Or he may have that far-off stare in his eyes. When you see these signs, slow things down and start your bedtime routine.

Consider what's going on in your child's life. There are situations and events that can lead to or worsen sleep problems, for example, a separation from a parent, a new sibling, a new caregiver, etc. Even exciting milestones, like learning a new skill (such as walking) can temporarily disrupt your child's sleep. When this happens, be patient and consistent, and try to maintain your bedtime routine. With time and patience, your child's sleep will likely get back on track.

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Put baby to sleep, awake. Beginning at around 4 months of age, you can help your baby learn to fall asleep on her own by putting her down to sleep when she is drowsy *but not asleep*. Learning to fall asleep on her own also helps her get herself back to sleep when she awakens in the middle of the night. When you rock your baby to sleep, rub her back, or feed her until she falls asleep, she may have trouble putting herself back to sleep when she awakens at night.

Take into account your child's temperament. Different babies develop “self-soothing” skills at different rates and in different ways. The more reactive or intense your baby is, the more challenging it may be for him to soothe himself. These babies often need more help to be calmed.

Plan for protests. As your child learns to fall asleep on her own, she may cry or protest. This is very common, since it is a big change for her. So it's important to have a plan for how to respond when she cries out for you. For example, you might want to peek your head in every few minutes. Or you may decide not to go in at all after you put her down (unless, of course, you think something is wrong). Some parents choose this approach because going in and out can excite the baby and even upset her more. Think through these options, talk about them with your partner, and decide together how you want to respond. This helps you feel more prepared to follow through on your plan.

Be consistent. Time and patience are needed when teaching your child any new skill. Consistency helps children learn what to expect. If you change your response from night to night, it is confusing and makes it harder for your baby to adapt. When you are consistent with your response, it helps your baby learn new bedtime skills more quickly.

Love the “lovey”. For children over age 1, a “lovey” (such as a treasured stuffed animal or soft blanket) can be an important part of a child's bedtime routine. If you choose to use a “lovey”, it can ease the separation that some children feel when their parents leave the room at night.

Turn off the TV. Watching television together doesn't often work well as a bedtime routine. Television shows are often noisy and stimulating which makes it hard for children to wind down. Also, even though children are sitting near their parents while they watch TV, it's not the same as having one-on-one attention during a bedtime story.

For more info on sleep issues from birth to three, visit:

www.zerotothree.org/challenges

This resource was made possible by generous funding from the Carl and Roberta Deutsch Foundation.