



# Sleep Problems in Children

Sleep problems are very common during the first few years of life. Problems may include waking up during the night, not wanting to go to sleep, having nightmares, sleepwalking, and bedwetting.

Read on for more information from the American Academy of Pediatrics on common sleep problems and how parents can help their children develop good sleep habits. Remember that children differ in how much sleep they need, how long it takes them to fall asleep, and how easily they wake up. If you have any questions about your child's sleep habits, ask your child's doctor.

## Babies

Babies do not have regular sleep cycles until about 4 months of age. While newborns sleep about 16 to 17 hours per day, they may only sleep for 1 or 2 hours at a time. As babies get older, they need less sleep. Keep in mind that your baby's sleep needs and patterns may be different than those of other babies.

### How to Help Your Baby (and You) Sleep Better at Night

- 1. Try not to stimulate or wake her when you feed or change her during the night.** If you speak to her, speak softly.
- 2. Make daytime playtime.** Keep your baby awake longer during the day. This will help her sleep for longer periods during the night. Spend time talking and playing together.
- 3. Put your baby to bed when she is drowsy.** Do not wait until she is asleep. This will help your baby learn to fall asleep on her own, in her own bed. If you hold her or rock her to sleep, it may make it harder for her to go back to sleep if she wakes up during the night. Remember to place your baby on her back to sleep for every sleep until she is 1 year of age. Visit [www.HealthyChildren.org/safesleep](http://www.HealthyChildren.org/safesleep) to learn more about how to create a safe sleeping environment for your baby.
- 4. Do not rush right in to soothe your crying baby.** Give your baby time to put herself back to sleep. Your baby needs to learn how to fall back asleep on her own. It is normal for a 6-month-old to wake up during the night and then go back to sleep after a few minutes. Of course, you can attend to her, such as feeding her, changing a soiled diaper, or comforting her if she is sick, if needed.

## Toddlers and Preschoolers

Many parents find their toddler's bedtime to be the hardest part of the day. Children this age often resist going to sleep, especially if they have older siblings who are still awake.

### How to Help Your Toddler Develop Good Sleep Habits

- 1. Set up a quiet routine before bedtime.** This helps your child understand that it will soon be time to go to sleep. Use this time to read him a story, listen to quiet music, or give him a bath. Do not play with your child before bed, because active play may make your child too excited to sleep.
- 2. Be consistent.** Make bedtime the same time every night. This helps your child know what to expect and helps him establish healthy sleep patterns.

- 3. Let your child take a favorite thing to bed each night.** Your child may want to sleep with a teddy bear, special blanket, or favorite toy. These often help children fall asleep—especially if they wake up during the night. Make sure the object is safe and doesn't have any choking hazards, such as buttons or loose ribbons. Stuffing or pellets inside stuffed toys can also be dangerous.
- 4. Make sure your child is comfortable.** Take care of your child's needs before bedtime so he doesn't use them as reasons to avoid going to sleep. He may want a drink of water, a light left on, or the door left slightly open.
- 5. Do not let your child sleep in the same bed with you.** This can make it harder for him to fall asleep when he is alone.
- 6. Do not return to your child's room when he calls out.** Instead, try to
  - Make sure your child is safe and well before bedtime. If he is safe and well, there is no need to go in his room while he sorts out how to get himself back to sleep.
  - Keep in mind that your child's main goal is to get you to appear. So if you appear for any reason, even for "just checking," he will expect you to come each time he calls out.
- 7. Give it time.** Helping your child develop good sleep habits can be a challenge, and it is normal to get upset when a child keeps you awake at night. Try to be understanding. A negative response from a parent can sometimes make a sleep problem worse. Keep in mind that your child needs the time and opportunity to find out how go back to sleep on his own when he wakes up during the night.

## Common Sleep Problems

Children wake up during the night for many reasons. Most of the time it's because they are overtired or under stress. Keeping your child on a regular sleep schedule may help prevent many of these problems.

Common sleep problems include nightmares, night terrors, sleepwalking and sleep talking, bedwetting, and teeth grinding. If your child's sleep problems persist or get worse, talk with your child's doctor.

### Nightmares

Nightmares are scary dreams that often happen during the second half of the night, when dreaming is most intense. Children may wake up crying or feeling afraid and may have trouble going back to sleep.

### What You Can Do

- Go to your child as quickly as possible.
- Assure her that you are there and will not let anything harm her.
- Encourage her to tell you what happened in the dream. Remind her that dreams are not real.

- Allow her to keep a light on if it makes her feel better.
- Once your child is ready, encourage her to go back to sleep.
- See if there is something that is scaring your child, like shadows. If so, make sure they are gone.

## Night Terrors

Night terrors occur most often in toddlers and preschoolers and take place during the deepest stages of sleep. Deepest sleep usually happens early in the night, often before parents' bedtime. During a night terror, your child might

- Cry uncontrollably
- Sweat, shake, or breathe fast
- Have a terrified, confused, or glassy-eyed look
- Thrash around, scream, kick, or stare
- Not recognize you or realize you are there
- Try to push you away, especially if you try to hold him

While night terrors can last as long as 45 minutes, most are much shorter. Most children fall right back to sleep after a night terror because they actually have not been awake. Unlike a nightmare, a child will not remember a night terror.

## What You Can Do

- Stay calm. Night terrors are often more frightening for the parent than the child.
- Do not try to wake your child.
- Make sure your child cannot hurt himself. If he tries to get out of bed, gently restrain him.

Remember, after a short time, your child will probably relax and sleep quietly again. If your child has night terrors, be sure to tell his babysitters what they are and what to do. If night terrors persist, talk with your child's doctor.

## Sleepwalking and Sleep Talking

Like night terrors, sleepwalking and sleep talking happen when a child is in a deep sleep. While sleepwalking, your child may have a blank, staring face. She may not respond to others, and it may be very difficult to wake her up. Most sleepwalkers return to bed on their own and do not remember getting out of bed. Sleepwalking tends to run in families. It can even occur several times in one night among older children and teens.

## What You Can Do

- Make sure your child doesn't hurt herself while sleepwalking. Clear the bedroom of things your child could trip or fall on.
- Lock outside doors so your child cannot leave the house.
- Block stairways so your child cannot go up or down.
- Do not try to wake your child when she is sleepwalking or sleep talking. Gently lead her back to bed, and she will probably settle down on her own.

## Bedwetting

Bedwetting at night (also called *nocturnal enuresis*) is very common among young children. Sometime in the first years of life, most children stop urinating in their sleep. Bedwetting usually disappears as children get older. However, for some children (mostly boys), bedwetting can occur throughout grade school and even middle school.

If you are concerned about your child's bedwetting, talk with your child's doctor. There are treatments available.

## What You Can Do

- Do not blame or punish your child for wetting the bed. Reassure him that it will get better in time.
- Keep in mind that bedwetting is not your child's fault. Urinating while asleep often involves your child's maturing brain.
  - Like sleepwalking and sleep talking, bedwetting just happens.
  - Even if your child urinates before going to bed and drinks very little in the evening, the kidneys continue to produce urine.
  - Enuresis occurs randomly through each sleep stage, so waking your child up at random or set times to use the bathroom in the middle of the night is usually unsuccessful.
  - Enuresis may occur if there is a family history of bedwetting. Many boys experience enuresis until the same age their fathers did.
- Whether your child needs to change his training pants or change the sheets, invite your child to help with the task. This task shouldn't be used or seen as a punishment.
- Set a no-teasing rule in the family for bedwetting.

## Teeth Grinding

It is common for children to grind their teeth during the night. Though it makes an unpleasant sound, teeth grinding is usually not harmful to your child's teeth, but you may want to check with your child's dentist to make sure. It may be related to tension and anxiety and usually goes away in a short while. However, it may reappear when your child is stressed.

## What You Can Do

- Try to help your child deal with stress.
- Talk with your child's doctor to rule out any medical problems that may be causing the problem. Your child's doctor may ask you to keep a sleep diary to track your child's sleep habits.

## From Your Doctor

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