



A Journey to the Land of Nod



Sleep is a vital need, essential to a child's health and growth. Sleep promotes alertness, memory and performance. Children who get enough sleep are more likely to function better and are less prone to behavioral problems and moodiness.

Research at Harvard Medical School indicates that sleep is not just for resting the body and the mind. Robert Stickgold, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, has demonstrated that a good night's sleep triggers changes in the brain that actually improve memory. Matthew Walker, Director of the Sleep and Neuroimaging Lab at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, suggests that this explains why children, teens, and infants require so much more sleep than adults, "At 12 months of age, infants have an immense amount of new material to consolidate, and, consequently, this intensive period of learning may demand a great deal more sleep." There is strong evidence that some types of motor skills and procedural learning – think walking, writing, playing the piano – are actually strengthened in sleep.

It is clearly important for parents to start early and help their children develop good sleep habits. Although the following information is geared toward helping parents and caregivers facilitate young children getting better sleep, these are good ideas for anyone who is feeling sleep-deprived.

The Bedtime Routine

The best way to help a child learn good sleep habits is to follow a nightly routine. A bedtime ritual makes it easier for your child to relax, fall asleep and sleep through the night. It "steps the evening down" and signals the brain and body that it is time to rest. The routine that follows should be modified to suit your family's needs. A late supper might mean that there is no need for an evening snack. Many parents are also too tired to read at night, and prefer to have reading time in the morning or after lunch..

- *Have a light snack.* Nothing sugary or heavy, a few crackers and a small glass of milk will provide the tryptophan (also found in turkey and peanuts) that has a sedating effect. Chamomile tea is also a natural relaxant. Too much liquid, however, could result in nighttime wakings for the bathroom!
- *Take a bath.* Scent water with oils found to soothe and calm such as lavender and basil. Warm, not hot, water will relax muscles.
- *Put on pajamas.*
- *Brush teeth.*
- *Read a story.* Pleasant stories with gentle rhythms and books that are familiar are good choices.
- *Make sure the room is quiet and at a comfortable temperature.* Cooler rooms have been found to promote better sleep.
- *Put your child to bed.*
- *Say goodnight and leave.* Don't prolong the "goodnight." Staying with a child too long, coming back in for every request for a drink or another kiss, only habituates the child to expect, then need, an adult present in order to fall asleep. This won't be helpful to the child, or the sleep-deprived caregiver, should the child wake up in the middle of the night.

Helpful Tips

- *Make bedtime the same time every night.*
- *Make bedtime a positive and relaxing experience without TV or videos.* According to one recent study, TV viewing prior to bed can lead to difficulty falling and staying asleep. There is a significant link between reduced sleep and the presence of television sets in children's rooms, according to Mary Carskdon, PhD, of the Sleep Poll Task Force. 43% of school-aged children have a TV in their bedrooms.

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- *Provide a soothing environment that remains the same all night long.* Rooms that have soothing colors such as lighter blues and greens, taupes, creams, and whites promote relaxation and a slowing down of the central nervous system. Bedrooms should be free of clutter and messes, have clean and comfortable sheets, weather-appropriate blankets, and low lighting. The light and temperature should remain constant throughout the night.
- *Encourage children to fall asleep on their own and discourage nighttime awakenings.* When you go to your child's room every time he or she wakes during the night, you are strengthening the connection between you and sleep for your child. Even babies who are held and cuddled when they wake in the middle of the night soon learn to expect this and do not learn to go back to sleep on their own. Nighttime feedings and changings should be done in with as little light as possible, and with a "business" attitude. Extra talking and playing while performing these tasks at night will assure that the baby will learn to come fully awake and look forward to the playtime. Except during conditions when the child is sick, has been injured or clearly requires your assistance, it is important to give your child a consistent message that they are expected to fall asleep on their own. A child should not need a parent to help him/her fall asleep. The child who falls asleep on his or her own will be better able to return to sleep during normal nighttime awakenings and sleep throughout the night.

How much sleep should a child get? Keep in mind that most children need lots of sleep. "Often," says Baby Center sleep expert Jodi Mindell, author of [Sleeping Through the Night](#), "if a child has poor sleep habits or refuses to go to bed before 11 at night, his parents will think that he just doesn't need a lot of sleep. That's probably not true — in fact, it's likely that such a child is actually sleep-deprived". To see whether your child falls into that camp, ask yourself these questions:

- Does your child fall asleep almost every time he's in a car?
- Do you have to wake your child almost every morning?
- Does your child seem cranky, irritable, or overtired during the day?
- On some nights, does your child seem to fall asleep much earlier than his usual bedtime?

Each child is different and has different sleep needs. There are, however, some guidelines on recommended hours of sleep. Sleep, is all sleep during 24 hours, including naps.

- Infants up to age 1 need up to 15 hours
- Toddlers age 1-2 need up to 12 hours
- Preschoolers ages 3-5 need up to 13 hours
- School-aged children ages 6-10 need at least 11 hours

This article has been excerpted from [A Journey to the Land of Nod](#), by Marla Ianello. It is available in its entirety on our website www.-the-family-place.org/sleep



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