



Sleep and Your Preschooler

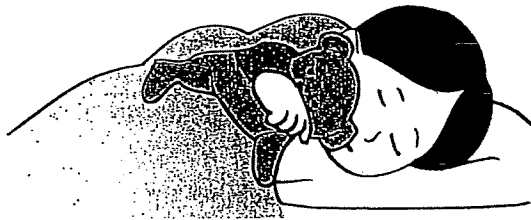
(3 – 5 year olds)

All children need a good night's sleep. Sleep problems are common in young children. This handout explains normal sleep in preschoolers and gives you tips that may help your child sleep better.

Getting enough sleep is needed for normal growth and development. Preschoolers who have enough sleep are happier and have an easier time the next day.

How do preschoolers sleep?

- Sleep patterns are still developing. They do not mature until the age of 5 years.
- Preschoolers may resist going to bed when it is their bedtime.
- Young children may have trouble falling asleep. They may get out of bed many times.
- Night waking can happen because of fears, nightmares or other reasons.

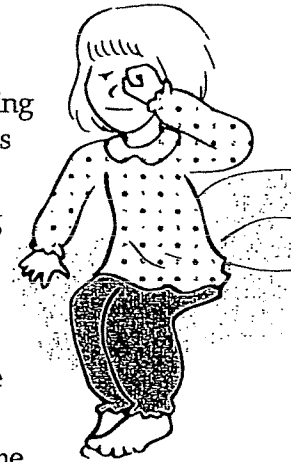


How much sleep does your preschooler need?

Most preschoolers need about 11-12 hours of sleep in a 24 hour day. This includes the afternoon nap that your preschooler may have. Many preschoolers no longer take a nap. Each child is different and some need more sleep than others. Paying attention to your child's behaviour will help you tell if your preschooler is getting enough sleep.

What are some signs that your preschooler is tired?

- Losing interest in people and toys
- Being clumsy, falling or dropping things
- Having less patience, whining or crying
- Yawning, rubbing eyes
- Being more active than usual
- Having a hard time waking up in the morning

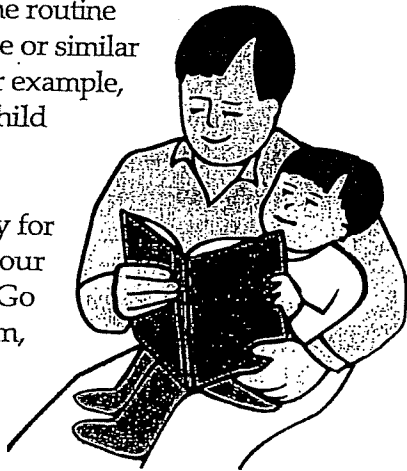


What can keep preschoolers from sleeping well?

- A child may have a physical problem, such as illness or discomfort. For example, ear infection, bedwetting, asthma or allergies.
- Having food or drinks with caffeine, such as chocolate, some types of soda pop, or iced tea may keep children awake.
- Changes in routine can affect children's sleep. For example, this may happen during moving, travelling or with the birth of a sibling.
- Children are sensitive to the feelings of others. Stress in the family, such as illness, relationship conflicts or financial worries may lead to sleep problems.
- Busy daytime schedules, late or overly stimulating bedtime routines may make children overtired. This may make it difficult for them to settle to sleep.
- A child's temperament may make it more difficult to develop good sleep patterns.

What can you do to help your preschooler sleep better?

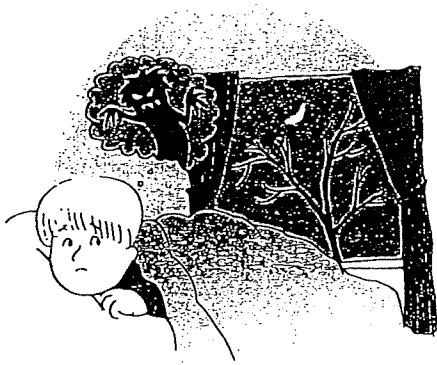
- Young children need lots of fresh air and physical activity during the day. Take your preschooler outside, for example, to the playground, park or the beach. If it is raining your child may enjoy jumping in puddles or you may go to a play gym or a swimming pool.
- Avoid stimulating activities before going to bed. For example, playing loudly, watching television or playing computer games. They will make it more difficult for your child to settle for sleep.
- Involve your child in quiet play before bedtime. For example, puzzles or colouring up to ½ hour before getting ready for bed.
- Have a regular time for bed. A good bedtime for young children is between 6:30 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Remind them ahead of time each night. For example, "It's bedtime after I read this story." You can show an older child where the hands of the clock will be when it is time for bed.
- Have a bedtime routine that is the same or similar each night. For example, remind your child that it will be bedtime soon, "Let's get ready for sleep." Offer your child a drink. Go to the bathroom, brush teeth, and wash hands and face. Read a story and cuddle.
- When you have said "Good night" put the light out and leave the room. Some children find it comforting to have a small light or soft music playing while going to sleep.



What can you do when problems occur?

- If your child was sleeping well before and not now, try to look for a possible reason. For example, a change at daycare or preschool, a scary movie or not eating dinner may keep your preschooler awake at night.
- As children grow they may think of many reasons why they need to get out of bed. Think of these reasons before they do. For example, have they cleaned their teeth? Have they said good night to everyone? Have they been to the toilet? Have they had a drink?
- If your child gets out of bed, be calm and lead the child back to bed right away. Say something short and soothing like, "I'm here and I love you, but it's time to sleep now." Remind your child of the rules. Try to be consistent.
- You may stay with your child while she is going to sleep if this is not a problem for you.
- If you want your preschooler to fall asleep alone, leave the bedroom when he is drowsy but still awake. Tell him you will return soon to check on him. You may tell him, for example, that you are just going to finish washing the dishes or use the washroom. You may decide to leave for gradually longer times before you go back and check on your child.
- You may stay beside your child first and let him fall asleep with you being there. Every day move a little father away from him until you are no longer in his bedroom. He may be reassured if the bedroom door is open and he can hear you.
- Give lots of praise and possibly a small reward, such as a sticker for each night your child stays in bed.





What can you do about nighttime fears?

- Nighttime fears are common. Preschoolers may be afraid of many things, such as the dark, shadows or monsters at night.
- Avoid scary or violent stories in books and videos or on television.
- Have a flashlight or night light in the bedroom. Leave their bedroom door open.
- Let your child take a comfort object to bed. For example, a teddy bear or a soft blanket may be helpful.
- Saying, "There is nothing to be afraid of" usually will not help their fears go away.
- You may stay with your child for a short time as he goes to sleep.
- Never tell your child that you will be nearby, and then leave the house once he is asleep.

What is a night terror?

- A night terror happens after children have fallen asleep. It can last for a few minutes to up to 30 minutes.
- They may sit up in bed, scream, and kick. Their eyes may be wide open, but they are not really awake. In the morning they cannot remember what happened.
- Parents often get scared and worried when their child is having a night terror.
- Do not try to wake your child during a night terror. Stay with your child to make sure he is safe. You may tell your child, "You are fine. I am here."
- Keep your child from becoming overtired during the day. Try to avoid stressful events as much as possible.

Dreams

- Children start talking about their dreams at around three years of age.
- Dreams may be scary for children because they cannot tell if they are real or not.
- If your child is frightened by a dream and still drowsy, be sure she is really awake so that the dream will not continue. For example, you may wipe her face with a warm, damp washcloth or have her go to the bathroom.
- Reassure your child that everything is okay. Explain that it was only a dream and not real (only pretend).
- Read your child a story about sleep and dreaming.
- You may put a mattress on the floor beside your bed and have your child sleep there if she wakes up at night after a bad dream.

Talk to other parents about your child's sleep. Good places to meet other parents are family places, neighbourhood houses, child care centres and community centres.

Talk to your Public Health Nurse if you continue to have problems with your child's sleep.



**Other fact sheets on parenting your
child are available at your local Community Health Office/Centre
or online at <http://vch.eduhealth.ca>**

**For more information, contact a
Public Health Nurse at Vancouver Coastal Health
www.vch.ca**

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