

Sleep Problems - Toddlers

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, nightmares, sleepwalking, and bedwetting. All children differ in how much sleep they need, how long it takes them to fall asleep, and how easily they wake up. Parents can help their children develop good sleep habits, even at an early age.

Establishing Good Sleep Hygiene

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. Use the following tips to help your toddler develop good sleep habits:

1. **Set up a quiet routine before bedtime** to help 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. It may be tempting to play with your child before bed. However, 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. **Allow your child to take a favorite thing to bed each night.** It is okay to let your child sleep with a teddy bear, special blanket, or some other favorite toy. These often help children fall asleep - especially if they wake up during the night. Make sure the object is safe. Look for ribbons, buttons, or other parts that may be choking hazards. Stuffing or pellets inside stuffed toys can also be dangerous.
4. **Make sure your child is comfortable.** He may like to have a drink of water, a light left on, or the door left slightly open. Try to handle your child's needs before bedtime so that he doesn't use them to avoid going to sleep.
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 every time he complains or calls out.** Instead, try the following:
 - Wait several seconds before answering and make your response time longer each time he calls. This will give him a chance to fall asleep on his own.
 - Reassure your child that you are there. If you need to go into the room, do not turn on the light, play with him, or stay too long.
 - Remind him each time he calls that it is time to go to sleep.



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 by a parent can sometimes make a sleep problem worse.

Common Sleep Problems

There are many things that can cause a child to wake up during the night. Most of these happen when children are overtired or under stress. Keeping your child on a regular sleep schedule or increasing the amount of sleep your child gets may help prevent many of these problems. If your child's sleep problems persist or get worse, talk with your pediatrician.

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 falling 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. 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 babysitters what they are and what to do. If night terrors persist, talk your pediatrician.

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 may be very difficult to wake 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 does not 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.

Bedwetting (also called enuresis)

Bedwetting at night is very common among young children. Although all of the causes of bedwetting are not fully understood, the following are some that are possible:

- Your child's bladder cannot hold urine for a full night
- Your child is a deep sleeper and can't wake up in time to use the toilet
- Your child's body makes too much urine at night
- Your child is constipated (this can put pressure on the bladder)
- There is a family history of bedwetting

What you can do:

- Do not blame or punish your child for wetting the bed. Reassure him that it will get better in time
- Have your child use the toilet before going to bed
- Avoid giving your child fluids just before bedtime
- Put a rubber or plastic cover over the mattress to protect against wetness and odors. Keep bedding clean.



- Encourage your child to help change the wet sheets. This will help teach responsibility and avoid the embarrassment of having other family members know about the problem every time it happens
- Set a no-teasing rule in the family

Bedwetting usually disappears as children get older. There are treatments available and you should speak with your pediatrician about them if interested.

Teeth grinding

It is common for children to grind their teeth during the night. Though it makes an unpleasant sound, it is usually not harmful to your child's teeth. 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 pediatric dentist to make sure the grinding is not harming your child's teeth

