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Sleep and Your Preschooler

Preschoolers need about 11 to 12 hours of sleep each day, which can include a nap. There's wiggle room about exact sleep times — the most important thing is to help kids develop good, consistent habits for getting to sleep.

Benefits of a Bedtime Routine

A bedtime routine is a great way to help your preschooler get enough sleep. Here are a few things to keep in mind when creating one:

- Include a winding-down period during the half hour before bedtime.
- Stick to a bedtime, alerting your child both half an hour and 10 minutes beforehand.
- Keep consistent playtimes and mealtimes.
- Avoid stimulants, such as caffeine, near bedtime.
- Make the bedroom quiet, cozy, and perfect for sleeping.
- Use the bed only for sleeping — not for playing or watching TV.
- Limit food and drink before bedtime.
- Allow your child to choose which pajamas to wear, which stuffed animal to take to bed, etc.
- Consider playing soft, soothing music.
- Tuck your child into bed snugly for a feeling of security.

A Note on Naps

Most preschoolers do still need naps during the day. They tend to be very active — running around, playing, going to school, and exploring their surroundings — so it's a good idea to give them a special opportunity to slow down. Even if your child can't fall asleep, try to set aside some quiet time during the day for relaxing. (And you'll probably benefit from a break too!)

The best way to encourage napping is to set up a routine for your child, just as you do for bedtime. Your preschooler, not wanting to miss out on any of the action, may resist a nap, but it's important to keep the routine firm and consistent. Explain that this is quiet time and that you want your child to start out in bed, but that it's OK to play in the bedroom quietly if he or she can't sleep.

How long should naps last? For however long you feel your preschooler needs to get some rest. Usually, about an hour is sufficient. But there will be times when your child has been going full tilt and will need a longer nap, and others when you hear your child chattering away, playing through the entire naptime.

Sleeping Problems

Preschoolers may have nightmares or night terrors, and there may be many nights when they have trouble falling asleep.

Create a "nighttime kit" to keep near your child's bed for these times. The kit might include a flashlight, a favorite book, and a cassette or CD to play. Explain the kit, then put it in a special place where your child can get to it in the middle of the night.

Favorite objects like stuffed animals and blankets also can help kids feel safe. If your child doesn't have a favorite, go shopping together to pick out a warm, soft blanket or stuffed animal.

Some parents get into the habit of lying down next to their preschoolers until they fall asleep. While this may do the trick temporarily, it won't help sleeping patterns in the long run. It's important to give comfort and reassurance, but kids need to learn how to fall asleep independently. Establishing a routine where you have to be there for your child to go to sleep will make it hard for both of you — and be unfair to your child — if you start leaving beforehand.

If you're worried about your preschooler's sleeping patterns, talk with your doctor. Although there isn't one sure way to raise a good sleeper, most kids have the ability to sleep well and work through any sleeping problems. The key is to establish healthy bedtime habits early on.

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