



Pediatric Partners

OF VIRGINIA

SLEEP

Nighttime sleep, like many other accomplishments, a child learns primarily from the parents. Infants and children do not understand that adults expect and depend on the sleep that they receive at night. Exhaustion in parents can lead to irritability, job stresses, relationship stresses, and parenting stresses. Children also deserve to sleep well at night to feel well rested and to prevent irritability.

Most newborns get up one to three times a night to feed. During the first several weeks of life some infants may have their “days and nights mixed up.” During this time period, it is better to adapt to the infant’s schedule by sleeping when the baby sleeps. You can help the baby’s transition to night sleeping by stimulating the baby during the day and giving exposure to sunlight through the windows. During the night, have the baby sleep in the crib in a darkened room. Infants and their parents sleep less soundly when in the same room, often training each other to wake and feed at more frequent intervals.

Infants less than 4 months of age cannot be spoiled. Do not feel guilty when you respond to your infant’s cries. However, realize that crying does not harm your infant. Most infants need to do some crying to learn how to self soothe and get themselves to sleep.

By 4 months of age, 90% of infants will sleep 8 hours without waking to eat. Infants who take frequent snacking meals expect the same at night. For this situation, encourage the baby to take larger daytime meals with longer intervals in between. Starting solids early (less than 4 months of age) or adding cereal to the bottle has not been scientifically proven to help the baby sleep for longer periods.

By 6 months of age, most babies are able to sleep through the night. Set up a nighttime routine with a set bedtime. Make sure the child is placed in the crib content, relaxed, and awake. Infants need to associate their crib with contentment and sleep. If the child falls asleep in the parent’s arms and then transferred to the crib, they may be confused upon waking.

If you feed, rock, pat, rub, caress, or sing your baby to sleep for the first time you put the baby down each night, the baby will expect this each time they stir awake in the middle of the night. Your infant needs to learn to associate the crib with nighttime sleep in order self soothe back to sleep. After putting the baby down, your attention to the infant’s cry often confuses and frustrates the baby.

It is advisable to avoid responding to the baby's cries. Many parents cannot bear their infant's cries for long. Keep in mind that the crying hurts the parents only temporarily, while the crying does not harm the baby at all. If the baby has not slowed crying in fifteen to twenty minutes, it is acceptable to go into the room for less than a minute. Be sure not to pick the baby up. Check on the infant quietly and avoid rewarding the crying with hugs and extra attention. Both parents need to agree on the approach because inconsistencies will confuse the baby and will make the crying worse. The first few nights are rough, but in less than a week there is always significant improvement.

Older children need the same basic approach. They need to stay in their room during sleeping hours. Do not argue if your child wants to sleep on the floor or on a blanket at the end of the bed as long as they are in their room. During the learning period, it may be necessary to shut, gate, or lock the bottom half of a split door in order for the child to stay in the bedroom.

Some older children fear the dark. Claming bedtime routine with comforting songs, music, or books can help this fear. Night lights are acceptable if needed. Do not allow the child into the parent's bed. This will only encourage repetition of this behavior on a nightly basis. Children and parents sleep better if they are in their own room and in their own bed.

Adolescents can also have sleeping problems. Typically there is difficulty falling asleep and difficult waking in the morning. Avoiding television and computer monitors will aid in falling asleep. Looking at a bright screen before bed resets the brain's internal clock to think that it is daytime. For adolescents and adults who have difficulty falling asleep, it is advisable to refrain from television or computers for one to two hours prior to bedtime. Reading a book or taking a bath prior to bed will help the body fall asleep easier.

Sleep is a critical part of a child's emotional and physical health. It is important for parents to teach children how to sleep properly to ensure rest for the next challenging day.