

Sweet Dreams

**Healthy Sleep
for Children
1 to 4 years old**



A Guide for Parents and Caregivers



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Introduction

Sleep is an important part of early childhood, supporting how young children grow, learn, and feel each day. During the toddler and preschool years, changes in sleep are common as children develop new skills and routines. Understanding sleep in these early years can help caregivers feel more confident, respond to their child's needs, and build habits that promote rest, comfort, and overall well-being.

Good sleep helps your child:

- Have energy to play and explore.
- Stay calm and manage feelings.
- Learn and remember new things.
- Build a strong body and immune system.
- Cope with change and stress.





Guidelines for Sleep

All children are different, and their sleep patterns vary as they grow. Your child may have a little less or more sleep than the guidelines below. Speak to your healthcare provider if you are concerned about your child's sleep.

Toddlers (1 to 2 years)

- Toddlers need 11 to 14 hours of sleep each day and may take 1 to 2 naps during the day. A nap close to bedtime may impact sleep at night.

Preschoolers (3 to 4 years)

- Preschoolers need 10 to 13 hours of sleep and may have a nap or quiet time during the day.



Creating Healthy Sleep Routines

A calm bedtime routine, with gentle reminders, can help your child settle for sleep.

Keep bedtime routines short and consistent:

Bedtime Routine (20-25 min)

1. Wind-down (5 min) – dim lights, quiet play
2. Bath and pajamas (5-10 min)
3. Brush teeth and use the toilet or change their diaper (3 min)
4. Storytime or lullaby (5-7 min)
5. Goodnight and lights out (1 min) – use the same phrase each night, e.g., “I love you to the moon and back”



Remember to:

- Avoid sugary drinks and snacks before bed.
- Use calm voices and gentle actions to help bedtime go more smoothly.
- Allow them to fall asleep on their own, by putting them to bed while they are sleepy but still awake.
- Bedtime fears are normal (e.g., dark room, bad dreams). Provide reassurance and keep bedtime positive.





Supporting Healthy Transitions

Toddler years are a time when children quickly become more independent, curious, and aware of who they are. These changes can sometimes make sleep routines difficult. With consistent, responsive parenting, you can support smooth transitions and healthy sleep habits.



Transitioning from Crib to a Bed

Many children move from a crib to a toddler or “big kid” bed between 18 months and 3 years. Signs your child may be ready include climbing out of their crib or showing interest in a bed.

Tips for a safe and smooth transition:

As children grow, safe sleep focuses on preventing injuries and maintaining a secure sleep environment.

- Use a firm mattress in an age-appropriate bed. Use a low bed or guardrails that come with the toddler bed.
- Keep the sleep area clear of hazards such as cords or small objects, and ensure furniture is stable and secure.
- Keep furniture away from windows.
- Keep doors and windows secure.
- Remove items that may tempt children to climb high furniture or shelving (e.g., toys, TV remote).
- Keep children’s favourite items on low shelves where they can reach them (e.g., books, stuffed animal).
- Children under 6 years should not sleep on the top bunk of a bunk bed.

Understanding Child Development and Sleep

Daytime Naps

Children often begin to nap less between ages 2 and 4. Some may go from two naps during the day to one and eventually give up napping altogether. As this change happens, you can help by keeping a consistent daily routine, allowing for quiet rest time even if your child doesn't sleep, and adjusting their bedtime to be slightly earlier if needed to prevent overtiredness.

Sleep Regression

Sleep may worsen for a few weeks when your child is teething, learning new skills, or going through big changes (e.g., starting daycare or school, moving to a new home, or welcoming a new sibling). Try to keep your bedtime routines the same and offer extra comfort. Be patient with your child and yourself during this phase.

As your child explores their independence, they may begin to:

- Say “no” or resist bedtime.
- Want more control or freedom.
- Be more curious and want to explore their environment.

These behaviours are normal and reflect healthy development, but they can affect sleep.





Parenting Strategies to Support Sleep

Children need chances to do things on their own, but they also need clear and steady boundaries. When parents have regular routines and respond with care, children can feel calm, sleep better, and grow well.

- **Keep routines consistent** to provide a sense of security.
- **Offer simple choices** (e.g., “Do you want the red pajamas or blue ones?”).
- **Gently return:** If your child leaves bed, calmly guide them back.
- **Acknowledge their feelings** while still holding the boundary (e.g., “I know you feel sad and want to keep playing, but it is time for bed”).
- **Encourage connection:** Spend a few minutes of focused, calm time before bed to meet emotional needs.

Setting Boundaries Around Sleep

Boundaries help your child feel safe and understand your expectations. Set clear limits around bedtime in a warm, reassuring way:

- Keep bedtime and wake time the same every day.
- Turn off screens 1 to 2 hours before bed. Screentime for children under 2 years old is not recommended.
- Be consistent in how you respond to bedtime resistance.
- Avoid creating new habits you don’t want to maintain (e.g., staying in their room until they fall asleep, if that’s not your goal).



DID YOU KNOW?

Second-hand Smoke and Vape Vapour are Harmful to Children

- Exposure to vapour, second- and third-hand smoke increases the risk of breathing problems. Breathing problems can make it harder for babies and young children to sleep well.
- Avoid smoking or vaping near your child.
- Keep your home and cars smoke-free.
- After smoking or vaping, wash your face and hands and change your outer layer of clothing.

Third-hand smoke is the harmful chemicals from smoke or vapour that stay behind on clothes, skin, furniture, toys, carpets, car seats, and walls after smoking or vaping stops. Children can be exposed when they touch these surfaces and put their hands or their toys in their mouths.





Sleep Challenges

	What it is	What you can do
Night Waking	Waking during the night is normal for toddlers and preschoolers.	Speak softly or pat their back to help them settle again. Keep sleep space calm and dimly lit. Reassure your child they are safe. Most children outgrow frequent night waking by school age.
Nightmares	Frightening dreams that wake your child. More common in children under 5 years old. May be linked to stress or worry.	Reassure your child they are safe, stay calm and comfort them. Let them talk about their dream or worries. Use a night-light or leave the door open. Avoid scary stories or shows before bed.
Night Terrors	Night terrors are different from nightmares. They usually do not cause your child to wake up. Common in children 4 and older but can happen from 18 months. They can happen more often when a child is overtired. Your child may scream, sweat, or appear scared, while still being asleep.	Stay nearby and keep your child safe. Do not try to wake them. Comfort them if they wake up. If your child is sleepwalking, guide them back to bed without waking them up. Most children outgrow by school age.

Talk to your health care provider if your child:

- Has sleep problems that continue for months (e.g., night terrors)
- Snores loudly
- Stops breathing during sleep
- Sleeps very little or wakes often for months
- Has night terrors, is sleepwalking or seems extremely tired during the day

You're not alone.

Every child is different. Trust your instincts and reach out if you're concerned.

Caring for Yourself

Taking care of your own rest, mental health, and self-confidence can help you respond to your child with more patience and care. This helps your child feel safe and secure, strengthens your bond, and supports their healthy development.

- Your sleep matters too! Set boundaries around your own sleep practices.
- Make your personal sleep space calm and comfortable.
- Practice self-care and make time to do the things you enjoy.
- Set realistic expectations. Remember that learning new routines takes time for both you and your child.
- Focus on progress, not perfection. Celebrate small wins.
- Stay hydrated, eat regularly and choose healthy foods.
- Stay active throughout the day.



It's okay to ask for help.



Where to Get Support

- Durham Health Connection Line:
905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729
- Durham 311:
For local services, information, and support
- [Durham.ca/childdevelopment](https://durham.ca/childdevelopment)



HEALTH
DEPARTMENT

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Durham Health Connection Line
905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729
Dial 311 (within regional limits)
durham.ca/childdevelopment

If you require this information in an accessible
format, contact 1-800-841-2729.

