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Toddler bedtime routine: how to get your child to sleep

Establishing a regular but flexible bedtime routine for your toddler is one of the best things you can do to resolve their sleep problems and create good sleep habits. Toddler bedtime routines that are calming, simple, and repetitive lead to many positive outcomes for both child and parent. If toddler tantrums at bedtime are an issue, there are steps you can take to help your little one feel calmer in the evenings.

The importance of sleep for toddlers

If you're worried about your toddler's bedtime routine, you're not alone. [Sleep problems](#) among this age group and small children are common, being reported by around [a quarter of parents](#) with children aged under five years.

We all know the importance of sleep in the development of young minds. Many studies have linked poor sleep in children with problems such as [unhappiness, obesity, poorer academic performance](#), and [weaker immune systems](#).

Toddler nap breaks

As well as a good night's sleep, toddlers often need to take a short nap during the day. Helen Ball is a professor of anthropology and director of [Durham Infancy & Sleep Centre \(DISC\)](#) and its outreach project [Baby Sleep Info Source](#). She explains the physiological processes that control our sleep patterns, and why most toddlers need [naps](#):

"Exposure to daylight and darkness controls our circadian rhythms (internal body clock). This causes the hormone melatonin to rise in the evening which makes us feel sleepy, and we wake as melatonin falls and cortisol rises in the morning. We also feel sleepy due to the build-up of sleep pressure (accumulation of chemicals in the brain that is cleared during sleep) as the day progresses.

"Toddlers' sleep pressure rises faster than adults', and so toddlers often need to take a nap during the day. This should be reasonably short to allow sleep pressure to keep building towards night-time. It should also happen in daylight (to avoid disrupting the circadian rhythm)."

When should toddler bedtime be?

Some parents may seek a definitive answer to this question, but in truth, there is little experimental evidence to support sleep time recommendations. Ball explains why she avoids recommending a specific toddler bedtime:

"We have found young child/toddler bedtimes vary greatly between families for many reasons which may be cultural, parent-work related, due to living and childcare arrangements. In any of these circumstances, a fixed 'ideal' bedtime can be unrealistic and cause parents unnecessary anxiety. What we emphasise instead is the importance of regularity (with some flexibility) and understanding how sleep biology affects toddlers, so parents can work with it rather than against it.

"As a general rule, toddlers who wake early or don't take day-time naps are likely to need an earlier bedtime than those who do nap, or wake later, as their sleep pressure is likely to reach its peak at different times in the evening."

How much sleep does a toddler need?

Many experts emphasise that the amount of sleep your little one gets is a more important factor. According to the [National Sleep Foundation](#), your toddler needs to be getting [between 11-14 hours of total sleep](#) in a 24-hour period.

Every toddler is different, and small deviations from this recommended sleep range are normal. If your little one seems generally happy and well rested this is a good indication they're getting enough sleep. If you do want to work out a [bedtime for your infant](#) or child, notice what time they typically wake in the morning and count backwards 11-14 hours from there.

Toddler bedtime regularity

When it comes to your toddler's bedtime, Ball believes that this should be "predictable but flexible". Establishing a consistent routine - made up of the same activities at around the same time every evening - helps keep life predictable for toddlers. This predictability is linked to calmness and contentment.

Toddler bedtime routines need to be implemented flexibly, and not rigidly," advises Ball. "If a toddler takes an accidental afternoon nap, for instance, parents should anticipate their sleep pressure will take longer than usual to build up. In this situation, parents should delay bedtime until their child's sleep pressure has built up enough that they can fall asleep quickly and easily.

"Trying to force a toddler to sleep when their sleep pressure is too low is counterproductive (none of us can fall asleep on command) and just makes bedtime longer and more stressful. Rigid bedtimes and routines end up increasing parental [anxiety](#) and parent-child conflict."

This is not to say that a toddler bedtime routine isn't beneficial; just that flexibility is key. [Evidence](#) shows an association between regular toddler bedtimes and better emotional self-regulation, and also a lower risk of [obesity in childhood](#). As such, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (AAP) recommends that parents start promoting a bedtime routine in infancy and throughout childhood.

The **many benefits of bedtime** include improved:

- Language development.
- Literacy.
- Emotional and behavioural regulation.
- Parent-child attachment.
- Family functioning.

How to create a bedtime routine for toddlers

It's one thing to know that a good toddler bedtime routine is beneficial, but this can seem like a hard thing to implement if your toddler has trouble falling asleep. The key is to kick-start each bedtime with a few activities that are both calming and simple to carry out. The aim of these activities is to help your child wind down and relax so that when their sleep pressure reaches its threshold for sleep onset, they can fall asleep quickly and easily.

"If they are anxious, in pain, overwhelmed, or excited then bedtime will take longer as parents will have to help their toddler to wind down before they can fall asleep," adds Ball.

Soothing bedtime activities for young children:

- Saying goodnight to everyone.
- Bath time.
- Brushing teeth.
- Reading a bedtime story.
- Cuddle time.
- Lullabies.
- Playing quiet music.
- A bottle of milk.

Pick three activities and try to do them in the same order each evening. Your toddler will be more relaxed if they know what's coming next. No matter what you choose to include, ensure that you always dim the lights. This helps with sleep onset as it [triggers the release of melatonin](#).

How to deal with toddler tantrums at bedtime

Toddler [tantrums](#) are exhausting for both child and parent. While tantrums can be considered normal toddler antics, if your child frequently gets worked up around bedtime this makes it almost impossible to get them to sleep. Crying can trigger cortisol production - a stimulating hormone that's linked to [stress](#) and prevents us from being able to sleep.

There are additional steps you can take to try to put your little one in a more relaxed state as the evening approaches:

- Physical activity - ensure your toddler is getting enough **physical activity** in the day, so that come bedtime their energy levels are low.
- Electronic and TV screens - don't allow them to play with smartphones or tablets at least one or two hours before bedtime. **Research** has linked screen-based electronic devices with sleep problems in toddlers. Ball warns that these screens, and TV screens, emit a blue light that suppresses melatonin.
- Bedroom environment - make sure their environment is comfortable as well as dark and quiet. This could include adjusting the **room temperature** or providing a nightlight to provide a calming glow.
- Bedtime adjustment - toddlers sometimes throw tantrums when they're overtired or when they have too much energy for sleep. If nothing else works, see if changing their bedtime helps.

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