

Time for Bed!

'Sleep' is an issue that exhausts parents, usually because they don't get enough of it. When we start the day tired, the day just becomes more difficult and little problems quickly grow into major mountains. Babies and children are no different. When they aren't sleeping well, they are unhappy and easily frustrated. They cry a lot and nothing seems to satisfy them for long. Everyone needs enough sleep.



The Newborn

Waking and eating every few hours is necessary for the newborn, but it is very hard on parents. During those first weeks, don't expect to establish a schedule. Just 'go with the flow' and sleep when she sleeps. After a few weeks, she will sometimes sleep a little longer and you'll be a little more rested yourself.

Remember that newborn babies must have their needs met promptly. Crying is their way of communicating with you. You cannot spoil a young baby by meeting their needs. These early months are when they learn that they are loved and that they can count on you to care for them. Pick them up, cuddle them, sing, rock, and snuggle them. Enjoy your baby.

A Few Months Older

At some point you may feel like you have your baby figured out - he or she is in a regular pattern of sleeping/waking/eating. Remember though that a baby's need for nourishment fluctuates quite a bit in these early months and just when you think you have her figured out, she might change her pattern completely.

After the first couple of months you can start gently encouraging her to wake and sleep on a schedule that better meets your needs. For example, if you like to go to bed at 11:00 p.m., try feeding her at 10:30 p.m. This may give you the clear three or four hours of solid sleep that you need.

Sleeping Through the Night

When will it happen? Actually, sleep researchers tell us that it never happens. Even adults move up and down through sleep patterns all night long, waking from time to time, but rarely remembering. What most of us do, however, is put ourselves back to sleep and it is this skill that your baby needs to learn.

When babies are very young they awaken because they are hungry and they need to be fed. The trick is to feed the baby at night without making this a playtime. While you feed her, hold her close and lovingly, but don't engage in playful behaviour. Keep the lights low and the room quiet. Make middle-of-the-night feeding times loving, but stick to business!

By four or five months of age some babies have become attached to their thumbs, fingers, or soother for sucking. This extra sucking helps soothe them. They may become attached to a blanket or favourite toy. Holding this item helps them put themselves back to sleep. It is these 'self-soothing' skills that parents want to encourage.

The Toddler Years

Agnes one to three are when children discover and start expressing their independence. They want to make their own decisions, so naps and bedtimes can become a battleground. We know however, that babies and children usually respond well to very structured bedtime routines that let them know what is coming next and give them a little room for

decision making of their own. Think about designing a routine that suits you and your child, keeping in mind that the purpose of the routine is to slow the child down enough to be able to sleep.

Ideas for a Bedtime Routine for a Very Young Baby

- A phrase that a young baby will come to understand means it is time to go to sleep, while tucked into their bed with a favourite self-soother (e.g. blanket, toy, soother). For example, “Now it’s sleep time.”
- A bath.
- A feeding.
- A special song that you sing while you rock them and give them a good cuddle.

Ideas for a Bedtime Routine for a Toddler

- Warning - “As soon as your television program is over, we will get ready for sleep time.”
- Bath - with some choice built in if they need it (e.g. “Would you like bubbles in your bath tonight or no bubbles?”).
- Brush teeth.
- Cuddled together, make up a story about the child’s day that they can have input into (e.g. Jason woke up this morning really early and the first thing he did was crawl into bed with his daddy. Then he went for breakfast and what did he eat?). Small children love stories where they are the star character.
- Sing a favourite song.
- Repeat the phrase “Now it’s sleep time,” while they are tucked into bed with a favourite self-soother, if they have one.
- Tape-recorded music.

Most families find that a happy bedtime routine is a combination of what both the child and the parents need. For example, a three year old child may not be ready for sleep at 7:00 p.m. but the parent may need to establish this as the time after which he or she is free to relax. In that case, the child may be taught that they must be in bed at 7:00 p.m. but can look at books until 7:30 p.m. An established bedtime routine also makes it much easier for other

people to put your child to bed. Just make sure they understand every step of the routine, because small children will insist on every detail.

But It’s Not Working!

If your child won’t settle down to sleep or wakes up in the night and needs your help to get back to sleep, repeat the last step or two in the bedtime routine. For example - sing the song while you give them a cuddle, then repeat the phrase “Now it’s sleep time,” as you tuck them back in.

This BC HealthFile has presented some ideas to help you with the challenge of parenting. There are other topics in the child development series that you may also find helpful. The BC HealthFiles link and this series can be found on the BC HealthGuide Web site at:

www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm



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