Managing Sleep Transitions in Toddlers

An expert guide to toddler sleep for health care professionals

Healthcare professionals are vital in helping parents with toddlers (1-3 years) adapt to the evolving changes in sleep patterns

by Lucy Wolfe, CGSC, MAPSC. Sleep Matters - Help Your Child Sleep.

1. **Sleep ability is an ever-evolving process.**
   Parents need to understand that sleep evolves during toddlerhood, and to be ready to respond to the challenges this can bring.

2. **Patience with transitions is essential.**
   Transitions happen gradually: rushing a toddler into new habits (such as moving from cot to a bed) can backfire.

3. **Pro-active parenting pays dividends.**
   Teach parents how to recognise the classic transition signs and how best to respond.

Sleep evolution: What parents need to know

As they move beyond the baby stages and into toddlerhood, parents will discover that their toddler’s sleep continues to evolve. They will experience a number of transitions that may be challenging. Three balanced meals, adequate fluids and required healthy snacks, along with enough fresh air and outdoor activity, are the solid foundation on which parents can build these transitions.
Young toddlers’ naps:
From 18 months to two-and-a-half years, most toddlers require somewhere between 10.5-12 hours over night, with a one-to-two hour nap in the middle of the day.

Older toddlers’ naps:
By closer to age three, the need for a nap may diminish. The toddler will require anywhere from 10-13 hours of night-time sleep.

Helping parents make the transition from two naps to one
Toddlers are typically ready to transition from two naps to one somewhere around 15-18 months. It is not advisable to rush this transition. If the toddler is not developmentally ready for a single nap then the parents may start to experience uncharacteristic night-time activity as a result. Encourage parents to allow this stage to emerge naturally.

Spot the three ‘single nap’ signs
Work with parents to help them spot the classic signs that suggest their toddler is ready to move from two naps to one.

1. Is their toddler taking longer to fall asleep for their morning nap?
2. Is their toddler routinely resisting the morning sleep?
3. Is their toddler sleeping in the morning and resisting a second nap in the afternoon?

In order to get a true reading of this situation, parents may need to observe these signs over a week or ten days before gauging that the time is right to make the adjustment. Nap strikes are common in toddlers, so it’s important parents assess the situation and plan any transition accordingly.

Timing is everything
The single nap works best if it happens close to 12.30-1pm, and lasts for around one-to-two hours. As the young child transitions, the singular nap may initially need to start closer to 11.30am, but encourage parents to move the nap closer towards suggested later time. Gradually moving the time forward by 15 minutes every two days is a good solution until the nap is starting at around 12.30pm. Advise parents to
give their toddler lunch before the single nap. This lessens the chance of them waking due to hunger, and they will also be naturally ready for a balanced evening meal.

This later nap start time helps to align an ideal bedtime of between 7-8pm for this age group. This prevents a wide wakeful period exceeding four or five hours, which can leave parents vulnerable to unnecessary night-time activity.

Making the cot-to-bed transition: Two key points for parents

1. Don’t rush it.
   Parents should keep toddlers in their cot for as long as possible. Don’t make the cot-to-bed move until closer to two-and-a-half or three years of age. By that age a toddler has developed the mental reasoning necessary to understand phrases such as, ‘stay in your bed and don’t get out’. Encourage parents to find alternatives to a ‘big bed’ transition until the toddler’s developmental readiness ensures that future sleep difficulties do not arise.

2. Remember the power of praise.
   Advise parents on the use of positive reinforcement and how to praise the behaviour they would like to see, such as staying in bed once the lights are out. This sort of reinforcement can make a transition seamless. Have parents consider adjusting their existing bedtime routine and make sure that they are firm about the boundaries, bearing in mind the behavioral component to sleep and its natural relationship with setting limits.

Assuming Control.

Developmental changes that emerge in the toddler years can also affect sleep. Parents often experience challenges with their toddler’s increasing ability to walk, and talk. Toddlers have a newfound independence that parents can find difficult to manage. Behaviours such as climbing out of the cot, running away, protesting, demanding and a general assertion of control over the bedtime situation can all appear at this stage. Working with parents to set limits and be consistent in their overall approach can alleviate bedtime struggles.

Sleep Changes.

Sleep disturbances such as nightmares and sleep-talking emerge from about age two. If this happens, then reducing television and electronic media and operating regular (and enough) sleep times often relieves reported symptoms.
BECOMING AN OLDER SIBLING.

It is a significant adjustment for everyone when the size of the family increases. It is challenging from many perspectives, including that of sleep. Parents often report a sleep regression from the older child around the time of a new baby’s arrival. Emotional conflict in relation to a new baby can manifest itself in sleep problems, resulting in bedtime struggles and frequent night waking.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

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Be aware of all the changes in your toddler’s life and environment that could be affecting their sleep.

When the toddler isn’t ‘the baby’ anymore: Three strategies for parents

When there’s a new baby in the house, it’s vital that the toddler continues to feel safe, secure and loved within the new family dynamic and doesn’t always require extra reassurance at or during the night. However, in the event that reassurance is needed overnight, it should be provided without exception until the toddler adjusts to his new position in the family.

Three strategies to share with parents are:

1. Keep things as regular as possible.
2. Try to avoid too many missed naps, later-than-usual bedtimes and too many changes in care-givers.
3. Have ‘connected’ toddler time, such as twenty minutes of undiluted, face-to-face play.

Suitable articles for parents on this topic are available at www.toddlebox.ie/behaviour


