



### Establishing Good Sleep Habits

It is important to make sure that your child gets enough sleep and sleeps well. The value of sleep can be measured by your child's smiling face, happy nature and natural energy. A tired child may have development or behavior problems. A child's sleep problems can also cause unnecessary stress for you and the other members of your family.

Many parents are unsure of how much their child should sleep. Experts recommend that your child get the following amount of sleep at each stage of growth:

- Infants (3 to 11 months): 14 to 15 hours
- Toddlers: 12 to 14 hours
- Preschoolers: 11 to 13 hours
- School-age children: 10 to 11 hours

According to reports from parents, many American children are not getting enough sleep. Some children sleep different lengths of time, either shorter or longer. But most children do have the ability to sleep through the night. Children who do not sleep well may have a sleep problem.

These are some signs that your child has a problem with sleep:

- You spend too much time "helping" your child fall asleep.
- Your child wakes up repeatedly during the night.
- Your child snores very loudly or struggles to breathe during sleep.
- Your child's behavior, mood or school performance changes.
- Your child who used to stay dry at night begins to wet the bed.
- You lose sleep as a result of your child's bedtime and sleeping patterns.

### Two Common Sleep Problems in Young Children

Many children have behavioral insomnia of childhood. This sleep disorder involves one or both of the two following problems:

#### 1. Sleep-onset association

All of us wake up briefly a number of times during the night. This occurs most often during the stage of sleep when we have most of our dreams. This sleep stage is known as rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Usually, we are unaware of these awakenings and return to sleep quickly.

Young children may cry when they wake up. Parents naturally may feel that they need to "help" their child return to sleep. Parents do this by feeding, rocking, holding or lying down with their child. As a result, many young children become unable to fall asleep on their own.

They depend on their parents' help instead of learning to comfort themselves. The child learns to connect or "associate" going to sleep with a person or activity. If this describes your child, then he or she may have a problem with sleep-onset association.

A parent may recognize this problem by saying something like this:

“I’m exhausted. I have to rock my child to sleep every night and for every nap. If she wakes up during the night, she won’t fall asleep until I rock her again.”

This parent’s child appears to be connecting the action of falling asleep with being rocked. She is unable to fall asleep when that action is missing.

## **2. Limit-setting problems**

Limit-setting problems usually begin after the age of two. It occurs when your child refuses to go to bed, stalls, or makes it hard for you to leave the bedside. Limit-setting problems can occur at bedtime, nap time, or when your child wakes up during the night.

Parents need to assert that they are the ones who decide when it is time for bed. They should enforce this time even if the child disagrees or seems active and alert. Children can get very creative when they want to stay up later.

They may ask for one more hug, a tissue, a drink of water, another story, to have the light turned off or on, or to “tell you something important.” It can be hard to know what is real and what is simply a delay tactic.

You need to be firm and consistent when you respond to the delays. Giving in to them will only encourage the behavior. Parents need to give their children well-defined limits.

### **These are some tips to help your child sleep better:**

- Follow a consistent bedtime routine. Set aside 10 to 30 minutes to get your child ready to go to sleep each night.
- Establish a relaxing setting at bedtime.
- Interact with your child at bedtime. Don’t let the TV, computer or video games take your place.
- Keep your children from TV programs, movies, and video games that are not right for their age.
- Do not let your child fall asleep while being held, rocked, fed a bottle, or while nursing.
- At bedtime, do not allow your child to have foods or drinks that contain caffeine. This includes chocolate and sodas. Try not to give him or her any medicine that has a stimulant at bedtime. This includes cough medicines and decongestants.

A child who gets enough sleep and sleeps well is more likely to be cheerful during the day. The better the child sleeps, the happier the entire family will be. Most sleep problems in children are not a result of bad parenting. These problems also do not mean that there is something seriously wrong with your child.

If your child has an ongoing sleep problem, then you should talk to your child’s doctor or to a sleep specialist.

**By Carin Lamm, MD**  
AASM Education Committee  
Updated February 3, 2006