



The No-Nonsense Guide to Naps

Catching the right amount of zzz's is the key to making your child healthier, happier, and better-behaved. Getting him to nod off when the sun is high, however, takes practice and patience.

BY MAURA RHODES

When her first son, George, was 3½ months old, Melissa Mathews of Arlington, VA, went back to work, leaving her little guy with what she describes as a “wonderful” sitter. The only problem: “When I’d ask if George had napped, she’d almost always say, ‘Not a wink!’” recalls Mathews. “My *infant* had not slept all day!”

Naturally, the lack of sleep made for a furious George: He was super cranky in the evening, and because his body clock wasn’t set to sleep during the day, on the weekends naptime was a nightmare. “I would put him down, but he just cried,” recalls Mathews. “If he slept, it was never for more than twenty minutes.”

Everyone knows that babies and young kids are supposed to sleep during the day. Not only do naps provide those precious mom moments we need (logging on to Facebook, and, oh, say, taking a shower—or napping!), they’re necessary to your child’s healthy development. During sleep, babies produce growth hormones; their immune systems enjoy a boost (read: a well-rested child is less likely to become sick); and an incredible amount of brain work goes on in terms of memory storage, retention, and organization.

In other words, while children sleep, what they’ve learned during their waking hours is properly filed away for easy access later on, says sleep coach Kim West, a clinical social worker in Annapolis, MD, and author of *The Sleep Lady’s Good Night, Sleep Tight: Gentle Proven Solutions to Help Your Child Sleep Well and Wake Up Happy*. “When kids start taking regular naps and sleeping through the night, their development blossoms,” she adds.

Conversely, sleep deprivation has been linked to all sorts of health problems in kids. Research shows that children under age 5 who don’t enjoy enough nighttime sleep—typically 10 to 12 hours, depending on age—are at an increased risk of obesity, which can lead to a host of health risks like diabetes and heart

disease, according to a recent study in the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. Similarly, another study conducted by Harvard researcher Elsie Taveras, Ph.D., found that babies who slept fewer than 12 hours total per day have double the risk of being overweight.

Perhaps most obviously, naplessness can make a child almost impossible to live with. (Just think about the last dinnertime meltdown you had to navigate when your kid neglected to take his afternoon nap.) “Some children who are labeled as having ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] actually may also have poor sleep quality, which can contribute to difficulty concentrating and affect their ability to understand and perform even simple tasks at home and in school,” says Robert Beckerman, M.D., a sleep medicine disorders specialist at Children’s Mercy Hospitals and Clinics, in Kansas City, MO. And although many kids give up their nap by preschool, at least some occasional daytime sleep can still be beneficial. Researchers at the University of Southern Mississippi found that 4- and 5-year-olds who never napped had higher levels of hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression than did children of the same age who took a nap at least once a week, according to parent reports.

Nap Know-How

Any mom who’s slogged through a day with a young child who refuses to nap knows that those little breaks are also, at the very least, essential to *her* well-being. So when, where, and how can you make it happen? Follow this Rx for common naptime nightmares:

CURIOSITY KILLED THE NAP

Dear Sleep Lady: Our 5-month-old does all she can to not give in to sleep, like she's afraid of missing something. —Kim Galbraith, Murray, UT

Dear Curious: You've got what I call an "alert" baby. Smart, engaged, and, unfortunately, awake. The key is to start putting her down awake at nighttime, so she can learn how to soothe herself to sleep. Then she'll be better able to handle naps. During the day, watch for cues she's tired, like a glassy-eyed look or fussiness, and keep an eye on the clock. Babies this age can't stay up more than three hours at a stretch. —Sleep coach Kim West



MOVING VIOLATIONS

BIRTH TO 6 MONTHS

Daily Nap Needs

0–8 weeks: three or four naps (or more), for a total of six to seven hours

2–6 months: three naps, for a total of five hours

What's Going On

Young babies are in the process of organizing their sleep. After months in total darkness, when they were as likely to party at midnight (remember all that pregnant pummeling that started up the minute you laid your head on the pillow?) as sleep all day, newborns need to learn the difference between night and day. Plus, until they're about 8 weeks old, babies need to wake up and eat every two to three hours. By 3 to 4 months, many begin to space out feedings a little longer and can often sleep for a five-hour stretch at night.

How to Deal

Newborns can sleep anywhere—stores, restaurants, at an older sib's soccer game—and in any position, such as in a car seat, a stroller, a swing, even draped over Dad's shoulder. That kind of portability is pretty convenient, but after 8 to 12 weeks, try to limit on-the-go napping, says West. While the gentle swaying of the car or rocking chair is often a one-way ticket to the Land of Nod, once babies hit that 2-month milestone, their shut-eye is most beneficial in a dark, quiet, familiar, and still place, which will allow them to get into the deep sleep they'll need to fuel growth and learning, West explains. Set the stage for your baby's eventual transition to at-home napping by putting him down at least once during the day in his bassinet or crib from the start, drawing the shades, and making the room as noiseless as possible (flip on a fan or white-noise machine if you need to block outside sounds).

RESISTING A REST

6 TO 12 MONTHS

Daily Nap Needs

6–8 months: two or three naps, for a total of three and a half hours

8–12 months: two naps, for a total of three hours

What's Going On

Older babies may begin to have trouble drifting off during the day because their brains are now programmed to be awake when it's light out and asleep when it's dark, notes West. Plus, they've got so much exploring and learning to do, they can have trouble switching gears. Even if her eyes are at half-mast and she's practically falling over, your baby may put up a fight if forced to go straight from playmat to pillow.

How to Deal

The third short afternoon nap some 6- to 8-month-olds take is really optional as long as the two "main" naps last about 60 to 90 minutes each. To make sure they happen, give your child ample time to wind down by closing blinds, reading a story, or singing lullabies—think of it as an abbreviated version of her bedtime routine, says Jodi Mindell, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in pediatric sleep medicine at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

SAYING "ADIOS" TO THE MORNING SIESTA 1 TO 3 YEARS

Daily Nap Needs

12–18 months: two naps, for a total of two and a quarter to two and a half hours

18 months–3 years: one nap in the afternoon, for at least two hours

What's Going On

Toddlers typically drop their morning nap somewhere between 15 and 18 months. "We don't really know why this is, but it's likely that their sleep is consolidating and they've developed the ability to stay awake for longer stretches," says Mindell. For most children at this stage, there's a short period of time when one nap is too little but two naps are too many, which often means dealing with a little crankiness for a week or two or three, until the transition to once-a-day napping is complete.

How to Deal

First off, don't try to consolidate the A.M. and P.M. naps prematurely, says West. Watch for changes in your toddler's morning sleep pattern: When he consistently starts taking longer to fall asleep than usual in the morning, and/or takes a very long morning nap and then can't go down in the afternoon, that's a sign that he's ready to make it through the morning without a break. To make the switch, start by pushing the morning nap later and later—11 A.M. for two or three days, 11:30 for two or three days—until he's going down after his lunch at about 12:30 or 1 P.M. This will now be his new afternoon (and only) naptime, and he'll likely snooze for two to even three hours.

WIDE-EYED AND WEARY

Dear Sleep Lady: I'm about to rip my hair out! Some days my 2-year-old goes to sleep easily, others she gets out of bed and stays up. With a 3-month-old to take care of as well, I really need that naptime.

—Christine Szulczewski, Spring Lake Park, MN

Dear Wide-Eyed: It's too soon to give up an afternoon rest, so set an alarm for an hour and tell your daughter that it's quiet time and she must stay in her bed until it goes off. She can look at books or play quietly with toys if she can't sleep, but she'll probably doze off more often than not. —Sleep coach Kim West

WIRED, NOT TIRED

It's one of the great conundrums of parenthood: Your 2-year-old misses his afternoon nap, and by dinner-time he's as hyped up as a battery-powered race car with a fresh set of AAs. Weird, you think—shouldn't he be facedown in his mac and cheese by now? Not necessarily, and here's why: When a child doesn't get to sleep when his biological clock says "Naptime!" his brain gets all huffy and replies "Fine, stay up then," and starts shooting out a chemical called cortisol, a stress hormone that induces the bouncing-off-the-walls behavior that moms of nap-skippers are all too familiar with, explains sleep coach Kim West. With all that cortisol still roiling around, your child is too wound up to hit the hay at bedtime, or even to sleep for as long as he should once he finally dozes off. "It's a downward spiral. Sleep deprivation is cumulative—the less you sleep, the less you sleep," explains West. The only fix is to work your way back on the nap track—and stay there as much as possible, even if it means putting off that trip to the dry cleaner.

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING NAP

3 TO 5 YEARS

Daily Nap Needs

3 years: one afternoon nap, for about 90 minutes

4–5 years: one optional nap (in the afternoon), or at least 45 minutes of quiet time

What's Going On

A preschooler's sleep requirements can be shift. Many 3-year-olds still need a daily nap, but by age 4 or 5, plenty of kids can make it through most days just fine without sleeping. Some may still need one or two "nap days," and beginning kindergartners can be so worn out from the challenges of "real" school that they need a nap after. In any case, non-nappers can still benefit from some quiet time each afternoon, says West.

How to Deal

Keep an eye on your 3-year-old's daily sleep, and adjust bedtime accordingly. If she happens to miss her regular nap, tuck her in a little earlier than usual that night. And don't let a preschooler of any age sleep for too long in the afternoon; it will interfere with her night sleep, says West. Leave at least four or five hours between when she wakes from her nap and bedtime. ☺

Contributing editor Maura Rhodes, a mom of four, has spent many an afternoon sitting in her driveway while one of her kids napped in the car seat.