

Night Time Parenting

Sweet dreams are what all parents want for their children and themselves. Sleep promotes alertness, memory and performance in all of us. Children who get the sleep they require are more likely to be happy, cooperate and be less prone to behavioral problems and moodiness. That is why it is essential for parents to start early to assist their child to develop good sleep habits. Falling asleep is not something parents can do for their child; a parents' role is to create a sleep friendly environment where their child can learn to fall asleep. Meeting a child's needs at night means a good sleep for all.

How Much Sleep Does My Child Need?

Just like adults, children vary slightly in the amount of sleep they need. It is recommended that children 0-2 months of age sleep 15-18 hours and 2-12 month olds sleep 14-15 hours in a 24 hour period. This includes day time naps as well as night sleep. Toddlers ages 1-3 should be sleeping 12-14 hours and Preschoolers 3-5 years of age require about 11-13 hours of sleep. For some toddlers and Preschoolers this may include a daytime nap. School aged children 5-12 years do best on 10-11 hours of sleep a night.

The Importance of Bedtime Routines

Children thrive on routines and rituals at bedtime that are predictable and consistent. This helps children feel calm and secure and able to fall asleep. Putting a child to bed drowsy but not completely asleep after six months of age will encourage the child to self soothe and fall asleep on their own.

Parents should create a bedtime routine that fits their own parenting style as well as their child's temperament. Routines should generally not exceed 30 minutes and may include a warm bath, teeth brushing, bedtime story, snack, a cuddle and hugs and kisses. Bedtime snacks are important so that children are going to sleep with full tummies. Snacks that are rich in carbohydrates help signal the body to produce brain chemicals that induce sleep. These include warm milk, cheese and crackers, cereal and fruit and yogurt.

Night Waking

Infants and children don't choose to wake-up in the night any more than adults do. Infants are wired to wake easily which is a built in survival method indicating hunger or the need for warmth and comfort. For toddlers and young children night waking is common as a result of fears, separation anxiety, nightmares and/or the need for attention. Illness and pain from teething may also wake a child from sleep. During night wakings, a parent's goals should be to reassure their child and have their child self soothe back to sleep. If parents become "the soother", it will be difficult for the child to put themselves back to sleep during the night on their own. Toddlers and preschoolers may need your reassurance that they are safe and that their parents are nearby during night wakings. Some children who struggle to fall asleep on their own may require a parent to stay with them as they transition to sleep.

Night time parenting is an opportunity to further strengthen a parents' loving relationship with their child so the child feels safe and secure. Children need the reassurance that if they need their parents in the night they will be supported to have a restful sleep..

Lisa Smith is the coordinator of the Building Incredible Babies, and Infant Preschool Wellness Programs. For further information contact Family Services of Central Alberta at 343-6400