



THE BED TIME STORY

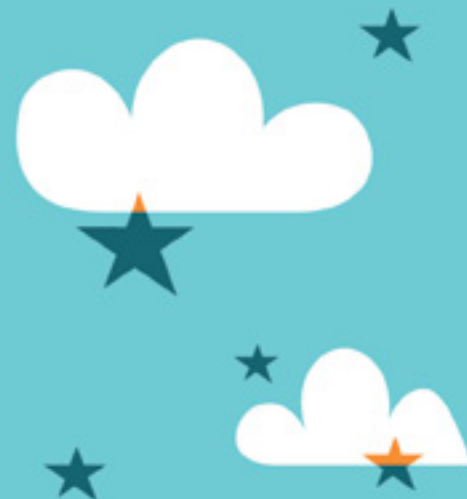


While your little peanut may look perfectly peaceful all tucked up in bed, her developing brain is actually a crazy busy place during sleep, host to all kinds of extremely important functions. Among these activities is memory consolidation—putting experiences in order, learning what’s important, and un-learning what’s not.

“This is crucial for everyone, but especially for kids, who are developing both mentally and physically,” says Dr. Nanci Yuan, director of Stanford

Children’s Health Sleep Center. “We are learning more and more about the impact of sleep on regulatory hormones. For example, in kids, the most intense period of release of growth hormone is shortly after the beginning of deep sleep.”

Knowing the importance of sleep, though, doesn’t always add up to a household of champion sleepers. What can parents do to help their kiddos get better rest? Bay Area pediatric sleep consultant Dr. Angelique Millette offers these suggestions:





1 Incentivize & Reward

Motivate kids who have a hard time staying in their room at night with their very own alarm clock. (There are several made for children that light up when it's okay to rise.) Reward them for waiting until the appointed hour—perhaps using a sticker chart, tracking seven consecutive nights to earn a special treat, or with fun one-on-one time, such as 10 minutes of playing a board game in the morning.

2 Start with a Script

For younger kids, write up a bedtime-ritual plan. Make sure the child participates in deciding how many books, cuddles, etc. (it will help him identify his own settling needs). List the steps in sequence—“Put on pj’s, Brush teeth, Read books, Cuddle, Lights out”—so everyone knows exactly what will happen. Review it together beforehand. When it’s written and rehearsed, the child is more likely to internalize it and less likely to ask for things that are off-script.

3 Remember, It’s a Phase

If after all your best efforts you’re still facing a little insomniac, don’t despair. Try to pull back and consider what might be going on—sometimes they regress as they face a new developmental milestone. Sometimes they’re struggling to process a significant event. Trust your intuition. And if you’re unsure, talk with your pediatrician or contact a sleep consultant to help you create a plan that you can stick to.

4 Carve Out Quality Time

Some kids are unsettled at bedtime because they’re longing for more attention from Mom or Dad. Spend a few minutes asking them questions about their day (focusing on the positive) or tell them things you’ve noticed about them, as it makes them feel recognized. For fussy babies, spend an extra 5 or 10 minutes cuddling and making eye contact or saying soothing words.



5 Follow Their Dreams

If your child had a nightmare or didn’t sleep well the night before, ask him about it in the morning. If he can talk about a bad dream, it’s less powerful and scary. Tell him that you understand he’s been frightened by his imagination and reassure him that he’s safe.

6 Respect the Routine

Sticking to a set bedtime helps children feel secure because it offers predictability. Kids of all ages (and grown-ups too) should ideally sleep and rise within the same 30-to-60-minute time frame every day—yes, weekends too. This may mean discouraging teens from sleeping in on Saturday mornings, since it can disturb their circadian rhythm.

7 Power Down



Electronic screens are a bad idea before bed, as their light stimulates the brain, making kids feel wired just when they should be resting and inhibiting the production of sleepy-time hormones melatonin and serotonin. Ideally, kids should turn off screens at least one to two hours before bed.

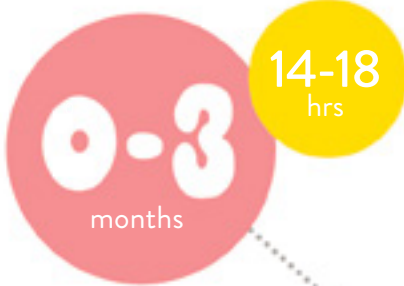




So just how many hours of ZZZs do they need?



Newborns



In the first month or so, newborns mostly sleep, but only in short stretches of two to four hours, and they don't follow much of a pattern. (The circadian rhythm hasn't kicked in yet.) Essentially, when they aren't feeding, they're sleeping.

Toddlers



Toddlers 1 to 2 years old need one to two naps of at least an hour. Some may take one longer sleep; others might do better with two shorter naps. At this age, many kids like to have a transitional comfort object, like a bunny or blanket. Hint: Have more than one.

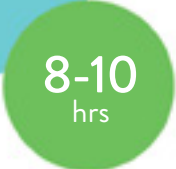
Infants



By the time infants are about 4 months, a pattern should emerge of shorter naps during the day after feedings and a longer stretch of up to six hours at night (thank goodness!), as they now have a sense of the difference between day and night. Toward the end of their first year, babies should be taking two to three naps daily. Make sure whatever they're doing before sleep time doesn't overstimulate them, and that the room is quiet and dark.



Teenagers



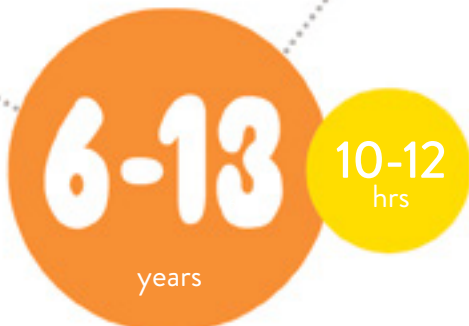
Teenagers need 8 to 10 hours of shut-eye and many aren't getting adequate rest. Screen time is a common culprit; consider requiring that devices be stored outside of the bedroom overnight.

Preschoolers



Preschoolers ages 3 to 5 should still be sleeping about half the day. Around 4 years old, they'll want to stop napping. If they can go the whole day and seem to be happy and secure, let them stop. If they seem overtired at the end of the day, move their bedtime up an hour earlier as they're transitioning.

Schoolkids



For kids 6 to 13, overstimulation can cause sleep problems. Make sure their schedules aren't too jam-packed.