

# Helping Preschoolers Establish Healthy Sleep Habits

**D**id you know that sleep is very important not only for young children's development, but also for overall family well-being?<sup>1,2</sup> The preschool years (ages 3–5) are an especially important time to create healthy sleep habits, as children's sleep patterns become more regular and new barriers or challenges may make bedtime routines more difficult to establish.<sup>3</sup> Having consistent routines during this period can help support children's emotional regulation, learning, and adjustment to kindergarten and beyond.<sup>3</sup> This article talks about why sleep matters for preschool-aged children, how much sleep they need, common barriers to good sleep, practical strategies caregivers can use, and when additional support may be needed.



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## Why Sleep Is Important for Young Children

Sleep is a big deal for young children. You may recall your own caregiver/s imposing sleep rules when you were growing up. Sleep supports young children's physical growth, brain development, immune system, and ability to manage their own feelings and behaviors.<sup>1</sup> During sleep, children's brains process what they learned or experienced during the day, work through emotions, and restore or recharge their bodies for the next day. Getting enough or adequate sleep can help children feel calmer, pay attention, and follow directions. On the other hand, when children do not get enough sleep, or their sleep is poor quality, they may be more irritable, have trouble focusing, react more strongly or show big feelings, and tend to show more behavior challenges during the day.<sup>3</sup>

Sleep can be thought of as watering and caring for a tree. Did you know that many trees do most of their growing at night when it is cooler and less stressful?<sup>4</sup> In the same way, children need enough consistent sleep each night to grow and thrive, and feel energized for the day ahead. When a sleep routine is predictable and restful, it can help children thrive across many areas of development and help make daily routines smoother for families.<sup>3</sup> Further, having a family environment that feels safe, secure, and stable can also help children build and establish healthy sleep habits.<sup>2</sup>

## How Much Sleep Is Recommended (Ages 3–5)

Sleep experts from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, a national organization of doctors and researchers who advance sleep health through research, education, and clinical standards, recommend that preschool-aged children regularly get 10–13 hours of sleep per 24-hour period, including naps, to stay healthy.<sup>5</sup> While some children still nap regularly, others naturally grow out of naps as they get closer to kindergarten. Either way, what matters most is that children get enough total sleep to support their mood, learning, and energy during the day.

## Common Barriers to Good Sleep

Many families experience challenges around sleep during the preschool years, and this is completely normal. At this age, many children try to delay bedtime. They may get out of bed several times, argue about bedtime rules, or ask for “one more story.” These behaviors can delay sleep and even lead to overtiredness, which can actually make it harder for children to fall asleep.<sup>3</sup> Fears and separation worries are also common during the preschool years. Children may become afraid of the dark, monsters, or sleeping alone, which can increase bedtime anxiety. In addition, other factors such as screen use and exposure to bright lights before bedtime can affect the body’s natural preparation for sleep.<sup>1</sup>

## What Caregivers Can Do

Just like any habit or skill, healthy sleep routines take time to develop. Starting early and staying consistent can help set children up for better sleep now and as they grow. Here are some things caregivers can do to support healthy sleep.

### *Establish a Consistent Bedtime Routine*

A consistent bedtime routine is one of the most effective strategies for improving sleep in preschool-aged children. A predictable routine helps children calm down and get ready for sleep after active play. Research shows that the benefits of a bedtime routine are “dose-dependent,” meaning that the more nights per week the routine is followed, the better the resulting sleep outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Even a simple routine like washing up, putting on pajamas, and reading a book together

can help children sleep better and improve the mood of caregivers.<sup>7</sup> These routines provide loving care and support early learning. They also help children learn to manage their feelings and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

### *Maintain Consistent Sleep Timing*

Preschoolers’ body clocks work best when they go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.<sup>1</sup> To support healthy sleep patterns, caregivers should try to keep bedtimes and wake-up times the same on both weekdays and weekends. If a child stays up late, going back to the usual schedule the next day helps their body get back on track.

### *Create a Calm Sleep Environment*

Sleep hygiene refers to the habits and surroundings that help children sleep well. A bedroom that is dark, quiet, and comfortable supports both falling asleep and staying asleep:

- **Temperature:** Pediatric guidelines recommend a slightly cooler bedroom temperature to support the body’s natural physiological transition into sleep<sup>1</sup> and prevent overheating, which can disrupt sleep cycles.
- **Light exposure:** Exposure to bright light in the evening, particularly the blue light from tablets or televisions, can delay the release of melatonin.<sup>1</sup> Caregivers are often encouraged to set a “digital curfew” for their child. This means turning off TVs, tablets, and phones before the bedtime routine begins (e.g., at least 1 hour before bed), which helps the brain to calm down naturally.<sup>3</sup>
- **Noise:** A quiet room supports healthy sleep. If noise cannot be avoided, soft white noise can help block out other sounds.



## Daytime Routines That Build Healthy Sleep

Daytime habits affect how well children sleep at night. One important factor is called “sleep pressure.” Sleep pressure works like an internal timer. The longer a child stays awake, the more their body builds the need for sleep, and the sleepier they feel. Physical activity during the day helps build this need for sleep, while the timing of naps determines when that pressure is released.<sup>4</sup> For example, four to six hours between the end of an afternoon nap and bedtime helps a child build enough sleep pressure to fall asleep more easily. If a nap happens too late in the day, it “resets” the timer too close to bedtime. This may make it harder for the child to feel tired and settle down at their usual time.

## Communication and When to Seek Support

Good communication across home, child care, and doctors can help keep sleep routines consistent and effective. Professional guidance may be needed if any of the following signs are observed:

- Loud, regular snoring, gasping, or breathing pauses during sleep<sup>5</sup>
- Persistent sleep problems that do not improve, even after trying consistent routine changes
- Serious or severe bedtime anxiety or nighttime fears that affect a child’s daily life
- Excessive daytime sleepiness or ongoing behavioral concerns

## References

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## Key Takeaways

Consistency and predictability are the strongest strategies for supporting healthy sleep in preschoolers. A calm bedtime routine, a low-stimulation sleep environment, and regular bedtimes and wake-up times can all support children’s healthy sleep patterns and keep their body clocks on track. Caregivers can make small, consistent changes, to build long-term healthy sleep habits that can benefit the child and the whole family.<sup>6</sup>