

Sleep and settling for early childhood

Factsheet 10: Preventing sleep concerns: preschoolers 3–5 years



Summary

- By understanding and communicating with your preschooler you will learn their cues as they grow and develop. This will help to support positive relationships and sleep patterns.
- When your child is tired, they show signs or cues that they are tired. If you learn to recognise these signs, you can encourage your child to go to sleep at the right time.
- Bedtime routines help your preschooler develop positive sleep patterns and behaviour and can prevent sleep concerns.

Connecting with your preschooler

It is important that your preschooler feels secure and loved. You can do this by responding to them in a warm and positive way.

Positive interactions from people shows preschoolers that they are important and are valued by adults.

By understanding and communicating with your preschooler you will learn their cues as they grow and develop. This will help to support positive relationships and sleep patterns.

For more information about [good parent-preschooler relationships](https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/connecting/parent-child-relationships) visit the Raising Children's website <<https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/connecting/parent-child-relationships>>.

Recognising your preschoolers tired signs

When your child is tired, they show signs or cues that they are tired. If you learn to recognise these signs, you can encourage your child to go to sleep at the right time.

Preschoolers from 3–5 years might be tired if they have had a busy day outside of normal routines.

Tired signs for this age group can include:

- clumsiness
- clinginess
- being grumpy
- grizzling or crying
- demands for attention
- boredom with toys
- rubbing eyes
- fussiness with food.

Creating positive sleep routines and environments

Routines and environments play a big part in helping preschoolers get to sleep.

Children need a cue to tell them it is time to go to sleep. This is usually something in their external environment.

It could be a dark room or having familiar objects around them.

Some routines might be difficult to keep doing for the long term as they may create negative sleep behaviours and patterns for your child. Such as letting your preschooler fall asleep in your bed, as they may only go to sleep in your bed in the future. It's up to you to decide whether you can maintain these types of routines.

Sleep environment

Some things you can do to create a good sleep environment for your preschooler include:

- Darkened and quiet environments.
- Having a bath at night.
- Consistent and predictable bedtimes and wake times.
- Quietness and reducing stimulation, such as screen time, television and boisterous play, before bedtime
- Self-soothing objects such as soft toys and special blankets
- Positive bedtime routines including pre-sleep associations such as reading, lullabies and putting your preschooler in bed when they are tired, but still awake.

Bedtime routines

Bedtime routines help your preschooler develop positive sleep patterns and behaviour and can prevent sleep problems.

Regular daytime and bedtime routines can help your child to fall asleep and stay asleep. They let your child know that sleep is coming.

They are predictable and calming for your child.

Some things you can do include:

- Keeping the routine short – no more than 30 to 45 minutes.
- Using the same relaxing activities before bed every day, such as a warm bath, a massage, reading stories or singing lullabies.
- Creating a calm, quiet, dark and warm environment, with no television.

Use regular bed times, nap times and wake times to help your child develop a good sleep–wake rhythm.

Flexible daily patterns

Research shows that it's good to keep using the same sleep routine as your child grows and develops.

Flexible daily patterns are a daytime routine you can use for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers to encourage positive sleep patterns and behaviour early on.

- Encourage **play** time during the day. Examples of play time for preschoolers include:
 - drawing
 - reading
 - singing
 - dancing
 - playing, such as ball games
 - running and walking
 - going to the park
 - climbing and jumping.
- Watch for the first **tired signs** and if your preschooler still has a daytime nap, put them to bed when they are tired, but still awake.

Flexible daily patterns are most effective if done throughout the day. You should reduce play at night and provide a quiet and dim environment so that your child understands the difference between day and night.

Mealtime is a very important part of the routine. With a healthy and adequate diet, your preschooler will have energy for play, which in turn encourages positive sleep behaviours.

Safe sleeping

Ways to sleep your preschooler safely:

- Keep their head and face uncovered, your preschooler should not go to bed wearing a hat as this is not safe.
- Ensure your preschooler is in a smoke free environment.
- Sleep your preschooler in a safe bed.
- Ensure that the whole of the sleeping environment is safe, including items within reach, such as electrical appliances and blind or curtain cords.

Cot to bed transition

Once your preschooler is observed attempting to climb out of their cot, it is time to transition them to a bed. This is usually between 2 and 3 ½ years of age but can be as early as 18 months.

It is important to make sure that your home and bed is safe for your preschooler. They shouldn't have access to things like cords from blinds, power points and stairs as they could hurt themselves if they get up during the night.

Information on how to safely transition your preschooler is available on Red Nose website, [moving from cot to bed](https://rednose.org.au/resources/education)
<<https://rednose.org.au/resources/education>>

To receive this form in an accessible format [email Maternal and Child Health and Parenting](mailto:MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au)
<MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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Available at the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>

This factsheet is based on research undertaken by KPMG on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services. The research included a comprehensive overview of contemporary research and evidence-based approaches and interventions for sleep and settling in early childhood. It considered developmentally appropriate strategies and cultural diversity. Download the full research report from the [MCH Service webpage](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health)
<<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health>>.