

Sleep and settling for early childhood

Factsheet 13: Solutions to sleep concerns: preschoolers 3–5 years



Summary

- It can be difficult to know whether your preschooler is experiencing a sleep or settling concern. If your preschoolers sleep patterns are not affecting you or your family and you have strategies that work, then they may not have a sleep concern.
- Parents are encouraged to be responsive to the needs of their preschooler. Responsive settling is recognising that your preschooler needs help and responding appropriately.
- For preschoolers there are a few approaches you can try for sleep concerns, these include: bedtime fading, rewards charts and free passes. It is important that the approach you choose is right for your family and preschooler.
- If your preschooler is attempting to climb out of their cot, it is time to move them to a bed. Make sure that the home is safe to reduce their risk of injury.

Sleep concerns and your preschooler

It can be difficult to know whether your child is experiencing a sleep or settling concern. If your preschoolers sleeping patterns are not affecting you or your family and you have strategies that work, then they may not have a sleep concern.

The following definition of 'severe night waking' provides a guide - however, you know your child the best, and if something is a concern for you, seek help and advice from your maternal and child health nurse, doctor or the Maternal and Child Health Line on Tel: 13 22 29.

Severe night waking is when your child does one or more of the following things five or more times a week for more than one or two weeks:

- consistently wakes more than three times a night
- consistently takes more than 30 minutes to settle
- stays awake for 20 minutes after waking
- goes into the parents' or caregivers' bed
- has difficulties with sleep and settling that is causing parents / caregivers significant distress.

If you think your child is experiencing a sleep concern, you should talk to your maternal and child health nurse or doctor to make sure there are no underlying health issues.

Strategies to help your preschooler sleep and settle

Every preschooler is different, and some may continue to wake overnight.

Parents are encouraged to be responsive to the needs of their preschooler. Responsive settling is recognising that your preschoolers needs help and responding appropriately.

You can do this by knowing their cues, tired signs and the intensity of their cry. It is important that your preschooler knows you are emotionally and physically available if they become distressed.

Developing positive sleep environments and routines can also support your preschooler at bedtime. Further information is in Factsheet 10: Preventing sleep concerns available on the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

Every family is different, and you need to use a strategy that you feel comfortable with and suits your preschooler and family.

Bedtime fading

Bedtime fading can be used for children from 2 – 3 years. It is based on physiological theory of establishing sleep by limiting your child's time in bed. With this approach your preschooler does not go to bed until they feel naturally tired or drowsy, resulting in less night-time wakings.

- Record the time the child goes to bed every night for a week.
- Identify the latest time and set this as bedtime.
- Gradually push back the bedtime by 15 minutes every two days.
- You can also make bedtime earlier (if needed) using this approach. Once your child gets used to falling asleep easily and quickly when put to bed, move their bedtime forward by 15 minutes every two days.
- Continue until your preschooler falls asleep quickly and has minimal night-time wakings, reaching a preferred bedtime.

Reward charts and free passes

Once your child can understand and engage in conversation, you can use a reward chart or free passes to encourage positive sleep behaviour.

Reward charts

Reward charts are tools for changing your child's behaviour and may include wall posters or apps. They demonstrate positive behaviour or goal that your child needs to achieve.

Research shows that reward charts are effective in encouraging positive night-time behaviour.

It is important that the reward is given after the good behaviour has been achieved, rather than before (which more resembles a bribe). It is also important not to punish your child if they do not receive a reward.

An example, you could try is rewarding your child with a sticker in the morning if they do not call out overnight.

Once they receive five stickers, they may then receive a reward (such as a family bike ride, a movie night or special time with parents or caregivers).

Free passes

Free passes are another way to reinforce positive sleep behaviour. You will need to be consistent to use this strategy effectively.

Give your preschooler a pass they can use for one acceptable request each night, for example, a drink of water or a kiss.

Explain to your child that once they use the pass, they must give it to you and settle without any more requests or calling out.

If your child asks for something that is unacceptable (such as an ice cream or staying up later), or they begin protesting loudly and persistently, you must not respond as it will encourage difficult behaviour.

Safe sleeping environment

A cot is not a safe sleeping environment for your preschooler if they are attempting to or can climb out. There are strategies to help them move from a cot to a bed. Factsheet 12: Solutions to sleep concerns which is available on the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

It is important to make sure that your home and the preschoolers sleeping environment is safe.

They shouldn't have access to things like cords, electrical appliances, power points and access to stairs and windows as they could hurt themselves if they get up during the night.

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