

# Sleep and settling for early childhood

## Factsheet 6: Typical sleep behaviour: preschoolers 3–5 years



## Summary

- Preschoolers generally sleep for 10 – 13 hours in a 24-hour period, and some children will no longer have a daytime nap.
- Many preschoolers will have nightmares and night terrors and may want to get into bed with you for comfort. There are a few approaches and strategies to help your family.
- Night-time bedwetting is common at this age, as many preschoolers are no longer wearing nappies overnight.

## Sleep patterns and behaviours

Preschoolers aged between three- and five-years sleep between 10–13 hours in a 24-hour period.

The number of day-time naps will gradually reduce and stop by the time your preschooler starts school.

### Night-time fears

Many preschoolers experience nightmares and night terrors. This can make getting to sleep more difficult. It means preschoolers may also wake more frequently overnight and call out to you.

Your child may seek comfort from these night-time fears by getting into bed with you.

It depends on individual families as to whether this is a concern or not.

### Settling

By understanding your preschooler and learning their cues, you will be able to support a positive sleep pattern.

Some things you can do to develop positive sleep behaviour include:

- recognising and responding to **tired signs**
- using positive and consistent **bedtime routines**
- try to reduce night waking in older toddlers by using your child's natural tendency to sleep for the right length of time (called sleep homeostasis) by delaying bedtime by 15 minutes each night in order to reduce the time your toddler spends sleeping - **bedtime fading**
- if you notice your preschooler is attempting to climb out of their cot, it is time to move them into a bed - **cot-to-bed transition**
- tools for changing your child's behaviour and may include wall posters or apps. They demonstrate positive behaviour or a goal your preschooler needs to achieve - **reward charts**.

To learn more about each of the things in this list, download 'Factsheet 10: Preventing sleep concerns: preschoolers 3–5 years' and 'Factsheet 13: Solutions to sleep concerns: 3 – 5 years' from the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

## Positive sleep environments

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 your preschooler 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.

If you are having difficulties, it can be helpful to track how long and when your preschooler is sleeping, every day for a week or so. This can give you a clear idea of what might be going on.

If you've tried the above strategies for one to two weeks, and you are still concerned about your preschoolers sleep, talk to your family's maternal and child health nurse, doctor or call the Maternal and Child Health Line on Tel: 13 22 29.

## Night-time bed wetting

Night-time bed wetting is a common issue experienced by preschoolers as they are likely to no longer wear nappies overnight.

Bed wetting may also cause increased waking overnight.

There are several different causes of bed wetting, including:

- some children sleep deeply and do not wake up when their bladders are full
- some children produce larger than usual amounts of urine at night, and they do not wake up in time to go to the toilet
- some children have small bladders, which means they are more likely to wet the bed at night
- bed wetting often runs in families. If parents wet the bed as a child, their children may also be more likely to wet the bed
- children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more likely to wet the bed.

Remember, bed wetting is part of your child's physical and emotional development and most children will stop bed wetting as they get older.

For more information on bed wetting, please refer to [The Royal Children's Hospital bedwetting factsheet](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Bedwetting/) <[https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact\\_sheets/Bedwetting/](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Bedwetting/)>.

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>>.