

Sleep and settling for early childhood

Factsheet 9: Preventing sleep concerns: toddlers 1–3 years



Summary

- Toddlers are growing, learning and developing quickly. By understanding and connecting with your toddler you will learn their cues and be able to support positive sleep patterns.
- Learn to recognise your toddler's tired signs or cues so you can encourage your child to go to sleep at the right time.
- Toddlers need a cue to tell them it is time to go to sleep. This is usually something in their external environment such as a self-soothing items, a bath or a dark, quiet room.
- Bedtime routines are predictable and calming for your toddler and can prevent sleep concerns.

Connecting with your toddler

Understanding your toddler helps you bond with them.

Toddlers are growing, learning and developing quickly. They can get frustrated if they can't find the right way to communicate with you.

Even though they want to be independent they also get scared when they are separated from you.

By understanding and connecting with your toddler you will learn their cues and be able to support positive sleep patterns.

More information on connecting with your toddler is available on the [Raising Children's website](https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/connecting/connecting-with-your-toddler)

<<https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/connecting/connecting-with-your-toddler>>.

Recognising your toddler's 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.

Toddlers from 1–3 years might be tired if they miss a morning or afternoon nap.

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 toddlers get to sleep.

Toddlers 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 a negative sleep behaviour and patten for your child. This includes cuddling or holding your toddler to sleep, as they may then only be able to fall asleep if you cuddle or hold them. 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 toddler 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 taking your toddler to where they usually sleep.

Bedtime routines

Bedtime routines help your toddler develop positive sleep patterns and behaviour and can prevent sleep concerns.

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

They are predictable and calming for your toddler.

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 toddler develop a good sleep–wake rhythm.

Flexible daily patterns

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

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

- Encourage **play** time during the day. Examples of play time for toddlers include:
 - drawing
 - reading
 - singing
 - dancing
 - playing, such as kicking a ball
 - running or walking
 - going to the park
 - climbing and jumping.

- Watch for the first **tired signs** and then put your toddler 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 toddler will have energy for play, which in turn encourages positive sleep behaviours.

Safe sleeping

Ways to sleep your toddler safely include:

- Keep their head and face uncovered, your toddler should not go to bed wearing a hat as this is not safe.
- Ensure your toddler is in a smoke free environment.
- Sleep your toddler in a safe cot.
- Ensure that the whole of the sleeping environment is safe, including items outside of their cot but within reach, such as electrical appliances and blind or curtain cords.
- Don't introduce a pillow into the sleeping environment until your toddler is at least two years old.

Moving your toddler from a cot to bed

Once you notice your toddler attempting to climb out of their cot, it is time to move 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 the home and bed is safe for your toddler. They shouldn't have access to things like power points, blind or curtain cords and stairs as they could hurt themselves if they get up during the night.

Information on how to safely transition your toddler 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>>.