

Sleep in Preschoolers (3–5 Years)

WHAT TO EXPECT

Preschoolers sleep, on average, between 9 and 10 hours (nighttime sleep plus naps). The number of hours a preschooler sleeps will be different for each child, but expect your preschooler to sleep for about the same amount of time each day. Most preschoolers stop taking naps between 3 and 5 years of age. Some preschoolers continue to awaken during the night, usually as a result of poor sleep habits. All children normally wake briefly throughout the night. However, a preschooler who has not learned how to fall asleep on her own at bedtime, such as needing a parent to lie down with her, will not be able to return to sleep without help during the night.

Sleep problems are common during the preschool years, including nighttime fears and nightmares. Typically, these nighttime fears and nightmares are a normal part of development during this stage, and will lessen over time. Sleepwalking and sleep terrors often first appear during the preschool years. In addition, snoring, although common, may be a sign of sleep apnea.

HOW TO HELP YOUR PRESCHOOLER SLEEP WELL

- **Develop a regular sleep schedule:** Your preschooler should go to bed and wake up about the same time each day, on a schedule that allows her to get adequate sleep. Also, be sure that your child is ready for sleep before putting her to bed. This may seem obvious, but you may find, for example, that your preschooler has a “second wind” (being more alert and more active) in the evening right around bedtime. Moving bedtime a bit later will often avoid bedtime struggles. However, in general, late bedtimes (after 9:00 p.m.) should be avoided. Although your preschooler’s morning schedule may allow her to “sleep in,” morning light and household activity may wake her up and prevent her from getting enough sleep. An early bedtime also helps establish a routine that will be compatible with childcare and kindergarten start times.
- **Maintain a consistent bedtime routine:** Establish a bedtime routine that is the same every night and includes calm and enjoyable activities, such as a bath and bedtime stories. Avoid including television viewing as part of the bedtime routine, as this interferes with falling asleep. The activities occurring closest to “lights out” should occur in the room where your preschooler sleeps. Making a bedtime chart that shows all the steps of the bedtime routine can help keep a preschooler on track and help provide predictability.
- **Set up a soothing sleep environment:** Make sure your child’s bedroom is comfortable, dark, cool, and quiet. A nightlight is fine; a television, computer, or gaming system is not.
- **Set limits:** If your preschooler stalls at bedtime, be sure to set clear limits ahead of time, such as how many books you will read.
- **Avoid caffeine:** Do not allow your child to have caffeinated beverages or products (soda, energy drinks), as these may result in disrupted nighttime sleep.
- **Contact your child’s doctor if:**
 - Your child appears to have any trouble breathing, snores, or is a noisy breather.
 - Your child has unusual nighttime awakenings or significant nighttime fears that are concerning.
 - Your child has difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, and/or if her sleep problems are affecting her behavior during the day.