



# Sleep health and sleep development

## Children aged 3-5 years in ECEC

Sleep is a basic human function, but also an incredibly complex behaviour. In this fact sheet we provide some basic information about sleep development in children aged 3-5 years, and its consequences for practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings.

### Sleep health

Sleep has a very important role in the life of children, and a role in their lifelong development and health. Sleep is not only important for daily functioning, but is essential for children's physical growth, learning, and well-being. Children with poor quality or insufficient sleep are less able to regulate their emotions and behaviour, have difficulty concentrating, and may be at higher risk of accidents, injury and illnesses.

The quality and quantity of sleep that a child has can have a very real impact on their learning, behaviour and mood while at ECEC.

### Sleep need

Children, like adults, vary in the amount of sleep that they need. How much sleep a child needs is influenced by a range of factors including the child's:

- age
- genetics
- developmental stage
- home environment
- family and cultural background
- daily activities
- health.

Children come to ECEC with diverse sleep needs. This will vary amongst children of different ages, and also children within the same age group.

The total number of hours a child sleeps per day decreases across the early years. Current recommendations for children aged 3-5 years suggest that around 10-13 hours of sleep each day is typical. This is primarily made up of night-time sleep, but for some children will also include a daytime nap. For children who do nap during this period, the average duration of napping is around 1 hour.

### Sleep cycles

Sleep is not just one thing. In fact sleep includes a range of states that have different functions. The two major brain states that occur during sleep are Slow Wave Sleep (also known Deep Sleep), and Rapid Eye Movement (R.E.M.) Sleep. Both of these types of sleep are important, and they alternate in cycles across the night. Both Deep Sleep and R.E.M. sleep also occur during daytime naps in children.

Trying to wake a child from Deep Sleep can be very difficult, and the child may not be fully awake for some time afterwards.

### Sleep timing

There are also times of the night, and times of the day, when it is easier to fall asleep, and other times when it is harder. This is because a child's need for sleep is based on two things:

1. How long they have been awake.
2. The timing of their internal body clock (or circadian system).

The time at which children feel sleepy will vary from child to child, and depends on a range of factors including their own individual body clock, when they get up in the morning, and the regularity of their daily lives.

Just like adults, children don't fall asleep straight away, and children aged 3-5 years typically take around 20 minutes to fall asleep.

Not all children will feel tired or need a sleep at exactly the same time. For example a child who gets up earlier in the morning to attend ECEC may need to sleep earlier in the day than a child who wakes later.

### Sleep environment

The environment in which children sleep can also impact on the quality and quantity of sleep children receive. It can be hard for a child to get to sleep if they are excited, if there is a lot going on around them, if they have just been running around, if their sleep and rest times are unpredictable or vary a lot from day to day, or if they are not feeling safe and secure. It can also be hard for children to get to sleep if the sleep area is hot, stuffy, noisy, brightly lit or uncomfortable. The use of digital devices just before sleep can also impact on children's sleep.

There are a number of things that have been shown to support healthy sleep in young children. These include:

1. The use of regular, consistent and relaxing routines.
2. Ensuring that children feel safe, secure and protected.
3. Reducing light, temperature and noise.

The practices and spaces provided in ECEC can support or hinder children's sleep.

### A note on rest and relaxation

Children who no longer need a nap, or at least don't need one every day, may still need some time during the day for rest, recuperation, or just for some 'down time' to relax. Just like the differences in their need for sleep, children might need to have a break or a rest at different times of the day (depending on what they've been doing), and may rest and relax in different ways. Rest and relaxation are important for health and well-being, and learning to relax our bodies and minds is an important life skill.

## Sleep development... a time of great change

Just like other areas of children's development, sleep follows a normal developmental pattern across the early childhood period. From birth and throughout the first years of life it is typical for children to sleep and wake at multiple times across the day and night. As children get older their sleep becomes more consolidated, occurring more often during the night and less often during the day.

Children within the same group in ECEC can be at very different stages of sleep development.

Children aged 3 to 5 years are going through a very significant change in the organisation and timing of their sleep. While napping is common during the first few years of life, a child's need for daytime sleep gradually decreases across the early childhood period, and for most children eventually ceases. Just like children's language and motor development, the exact timing of this transition will be different for each child.

## Transition from napping

Most children eventually grow out of daytime naps. This transition is normal, and for different children this can happen at different times.

Changes in napping can be abrupt or gradual. During this transition period some children may need a nap on some days, and not on others. Children may often be quite sleepy in the evening when they are giving up their daytime naps. Likewise, some children who nap late in the day can have trouble getting to sleep at night.

When and how much children sleep at ECEC can impact children's sleep at home, in the same way that quality and quantity of children sleep at home can impact on their need for sleep in ECEC.

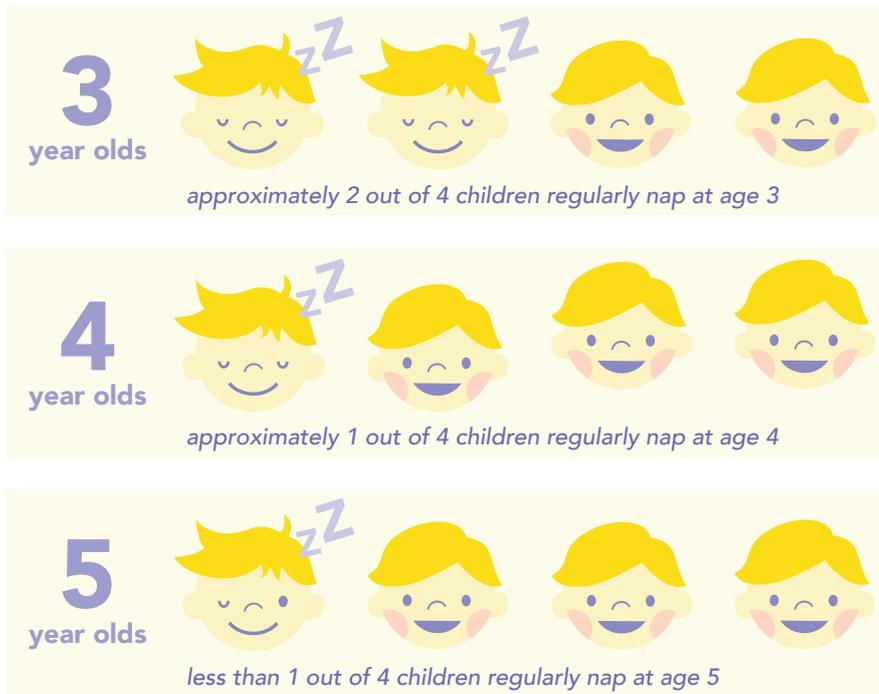
Whilst napping on a regular basis typically ceases at some point, even children who have not napped for a long time will sometimes require a sleep during the day. This might be for a range of reasons including illness, disruption to sleep at home or the busyness of the day.

Even children who have not napped for a long time may occasionally need an opportunity to sleep while at ECEC.

## Key things to remember

- Sleep, rest, and relaxation is an important part of the lives of 3-5 year old children.
- Children's sleep needs change across time and vary from child to child.
- It is normal for children in this age group to no longer need a daytime sleep.
- The environments we provide for children can influence their sleep and rest.
- Children need opportunities to learn to rest and relax their bodies and minds.

Many children aged 3-5 years will no longer require a daytime sleep whilst at their ECEC service.



While some children still nap between the ages of 3-5 years, a large proportion of children do not.

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