



Sleep health and sleep development in Early Childhood Education and Care

Babies and toddlers

This fact sheet provides information about sleep development in babies and toddlers aged birth up to 3 years, and how this knowledge can inform sleep, rest and relaxation practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings.

Sleep health

Meeting children's sleep needs supports their learning, growth and development.

Sleep plays an important role in the everyday lives of young children, and influences their lifelong development and health. A child who is well rested is better able to concentrate, take on new information, interact positively with others, and deal with conflict and challenges. During sleep, learning is strengthened, and biological changes occur that help children to grow, develop and stay healthy.

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. Disruptions to sleep at this age can also have very serious impacts on the well-being and health of parents and families.

Sleep need

How much sleep a baby and toddler needs varies across time and children.

Baby and toddler's need for sleep varies greatly across the early years of life. Newborns typically need the most sleep, with the number of hours of sleep reducing as children grow. The amount of sleep a child needs and the speed of change in sleep need varies from child to child.

How much sleep a baby or toddler will need is influenced by a range of factors including their age, genetics, developmental stage, health,

The quality and quantity of sleep that a baby or toddler has can impact on their ability to learn, regulate their behaviour, interact with others and stay healthy while at ECEC.

home environment, family and cultural background and daily activities and routines.

Current recommendations for sleep are provided as a range, reflecting the large differences in sleep need between individual children.

Within a group of babies and toddlers in ECEC, there are likely to be very large differences in sleep need, and these needs will change across time.

Sleep timing

Responding to individual sleep needs is important for good sleep health.

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

Babies and toddlers are not always able to tell us when they need sleep, so it is important to look for and respond to sleep cues. Some common cues that babies and toddlers may give to indicate sleepiness include:

- yawning
- eye rubbing
- irritability or grumpiness
- crying
- disengaging with activities
- seeking comfort from adults (e.g. cuddles)
- decreased ability to regulate behaviours (i.e. they may become increasingly active, noisy).

Not all babies or toddlers will feel tired or need a sleep at exactly the same time while at ECEC, and it is important for educators to recognise and respond to an individual child's sleep cues.

Safe and supportive sleep environments

The environment in which babies and toddlers sleep will impact on the quality and quantity of their sleep.

It can be difficult for children to get to sleep if they are not feeling safe and secure, have just been very active, there is a lot going on around them, or if their sleep and rest times vary a lot from day to day. It can also be hard for children to sleep if their environment is hot, stuffy, noisy, brightly lit or just uncomfortable. Prior to rest time the use of digital devices such as televisions, tablets or phones can also reduce children's ability to sleep.

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

- the use of regular, consistent and relaxing routines.
- ensuring that children feel safe, secure and protected.
- reducing light, room temperature and noise.

Just like adults, some children fall asleep quite quickly, whilst others need more time and support. Babies and toddlers typically take around 20 minutes to fall asleep, although this will vary for individual children. Setting up consistent and calming pre-sleep routines can help children to settle by providing cues that prepare their minds and bodies for sleep.

Recommended total sleep per day for babies and toddlers



This total sleep time is made up of both night-time sleep and also, typically, one or more daytime naps.

Source: * Hirshkowitz, et al. (2015). **Paruthi, et al. (2016).

Safe Sleeping Guidelines

Very young children rely on adults for care and protection. This includes providing safe sleep environments. For babies below 12 months there is a risk of sudden or unexpected death during sleep, known as SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) or SUDI (Sudden unexpected death in infancy). For this reason, sleep environments *must comply with Safe Sleeping Guidelines*. These include placing babies on their back to sleep, ensuring the baby's face is uncovered, and providing a safe sleep environment. For current Safe Sleeping Guidelines please refer to www.sidsandkids.org. As we learn more about SIDS, these guidelines change, so it is important that all educators review these periodically and remain up to date with safe sleeping practices.

For babies below 12 months of age, sleep environments in ECEC must comply with current Safe Sleeping Guidelines.

Sleep practice

Family and educator expectations of a child's sleep will be influenced by their cultural background, social context and personal beliefs.

In a genuine partnership, educators will work with parents to provide continuity in sleep practices. However, it must also be acknowledged that some practices may not be feasible in the group-based context or cannot be implemented because they do not comply with current safe sleeping guidelines.

When deciding on and implementing sleep practices it is important to:

- identify and respect the needs and preferences of individual children and families.
- work with families to explore the feasibility of different practices within the ECEC setting.
- ensure all practices comply with safe sleeping guidelines.

A note on rest and relaxation

Rest and relaxation are also important for babies and toddlers

It is important to consider how environments are set up and whether there are times, spaces, and places where children are able to retreat or remove themselves from the busyness of the day.

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 also important for health and well-being, and learning to relax our minds and bodies is an important life skill.

Napping development

As in other areas of children's development, sleep generally follows a predictable developmental pattern across the early childhood years.

It is typical for very young children to sleep and wake at multiple times across the day and night. As children grow older their sleep becomes more concentrated into the night time period and the need for daytime sleep decreases.

During early childhood the pattern and timing of daytime naps changes considerably. Across time, children transition from having many daytime naps, to a couple, to just one. For some children napping ceases all together. Just like children's language and motor development, the exact timing of this change will be different for each child.

Napping in babies and toddlers

0 - 5 months old



1 - 5
naps per day
(average 3)*

at 6 months between
30 min - 6 hours
per day
(average 3.5 hours)**

6 - 11 months old



1 - 4
naps per day
(average 2)*

at 12 months between
30 min - 4.5 hours
per day
(average 2.5 hours)**

12 - 35 months old



0 - 2
naps per day
(average 1)*

at 24 months between
30 min - 3 hours
per day
(average 2 hours)**

*Source: Galland, et al. (2012). **Iglowstein, et. al. (2003).

When daytime napping comes to an end

Most children eventually grow out of daytime naps. This change is normal, and happens at different times for different children.

Although uncommon, regular napping can cease from as early as 1 year for some children. Many children cease napping between the ages of 2 to 3 years; with approximately 50% of children ceasing regular napping by the age of 3.

For children who are transitioning to a consolidated night sleep, the need for naps may be influenced by a range of factors including their sleep on the previous night, illness, or their activities across the morning. It is important to work with parents through this period to support sleep development both within the ECEC environment and at home.

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

Key things to remember

- The sleep needs of babies and toddlers change across time and vary from child to child.
- The environments we provide for babies and toddlers influence their sleep and rest.
- Providing safe, predictable, and calm environments are important to support sleep.
- ECEC services have a responsibility to observe current Safe Sleeping Guidelines and to ensure a safe sleeping environment.
- Babies and toddlers need adults to identify and be responsive to their sleep cues.
- Even babies and toddlers need opportunities and spaces for rest and relaxation.

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