



Meeting children's sleep, rest, and relaxation needs in ECEC

Children aged 3-5 years

Information for educators and ECEC services

To support the development of healthy life-time sleep practices, educators need to work with children and families to provide appropriate opportunities to meet each child's need for sleep, rest, and relaxation.

Supporting sleep rest and relaxation

Sleep, alongside good nutrition and physical activity, is essential for young children's health, learning and development. However, as children grow up, their sleep needs change. Their sleep consolidates into one night-time period, and daytime naps become less frequent.

As with all areas of learning and development, there will be individual variation in children's need for sleep, rest, and relaxation. For example, while some 3-5 year olds may still need a regular daytime sleep, many others will not. The sleep needs of a child may also vary from day to day (e.g. if a child did not have enough sleep the night before or if they are unwell).

During the early childhood period children's sleep needs are rapidly changing. In addition, factors such as family lifestyle, the home environment, illness, and extra-curricular activities (e.g. sport, dance) can mean that children's sleep needs change on a daily basis.

Children, like adults, sleep, rest, and relax in a range of different ways. Some will like to rest and read; some may enjoy relaxation activities like guided meditation or yoga; some children may need to be more active to relax. For some children sleeping may be more difficult in a group based setting. Within any one service there will be a large range of sleep, rest, and relaxation needs and preferences.

Services use a range of practices to manage sleep, rest, and relaxation needs.

The approach that a service uses will be influenced by many factors including: the age and characteristics of the children, the needs of families and the community, and the physical environment space and layout.

In thinking about sleep, rest, and relaxation practices, consider the 4 principles for R.E.S.T.

R

Relationships

Involve children and families in planning.

E

Environment

Create a pleasant and calm environment.

S

Sleep need

Support children's agency and autonomy.

T

Timing / Transitions

Ensure timing is responsive to children's needs.

R

Relationships

Get to know individual children, and work with children and families to develop practices to suit their needs.

Regular communication about children’s sleep, rest, and relaxation assists educators and families to build genuine partnerships and to work together, to find a balance that best suits the needs of children, families and services.

Discussing sleep, rest, and relaxation with children is also important. Just like healthy eating, talking to children about sleep, rest, and relaxation, provides an important opportunity to learn about recognising their bodies’ needs and to understand the importance of these activities for their health. The language that we use around sleep, rest, and relaxation helps children associate these periods as being positive and productive experiences.

In planning provisions for sleep, rest, and relaxation consider:

- Different strategies that could be used to support two-way communication with parents and children.
- Key times to communicate with families about sleep, rest, and relaxation.
- Key questions to ask children and families when getting to know a child’s sleep, rest, and relaxation needs and preferences.

E

Environment

Provide environments that are calm, pleasant and supportive of sleep, rest, and relaxation.

Creating a calm, pleasant and safe environment is critical in supporting children’s sleep, rest, and relaxation. Children have difficulty sleeping in environments where they do not feel safe or secure. Lowering the light and noise, as well as providing a cool room temperature and comfortable spaces for children, all help to support sleep, rest, and relaxation.

Rest and relaxation is not just about providing opportunities for children to physically rest their bodies, but also to rest their minds from the business of the day.

In planning provisions for sleep, rest, and relaxation consider how different spaces might be best used to:

- Provide children who need to sleep a quiet space without distraction.
- Provide children who do not sleep a space and opportunity to do alternate activities.

S

Sleep need

Support children’s agency and autonomy, and provide choices regarding sleep, rest, and relaxation.

As with other areas of learning and development, there is considerable individual variation in when children will cease to need a nap. Some 3-5 year olds may still need a regular daily nap, while others may not require a nap at all. The sleep needs of a child may also vary from day to day. For example if a child did not have enough sleep the night before or if they are unwell.

Providing choice and supporting children’s agency helps to ensure that practices meet the needs of children who require sleep, as well as the needs of children who no longer require it.

In planning provisions for sleep, rest, and relaxation consider:

- How to meet the needs of children who require sleep.
- How to meet the needs of children who no longer require sleep.
- How to respond to changes and variations in sleep, rest, and relaxation needs.
- How to include children in decision making about sleep, rest and relaxation.

T

Timing / Transitions

Consider how opportunities for sleep, rest, and relaxation are provided, and when these opportunities occur.

Children’s need for sleep, rest, and relaxation will vary across the day. While some children may be tired earlier in the day (particularly if they have needed to get up early or have had an interrupted night), others may not need a rest until much later. Providing sleep, rest, or relaxation at a single specified time may meet the needs of some children; however these times may not be appropriate for all children.

The length of time in which children sleep will also differ for individual children. Whilst some children aged 3-5 years may require a longer sleep, others may only sleep for a short period or not at all. It is important to ensure that children who require sleep are provided with enough time to meet their individual sleep need.

How children transition to sleep can influence the quality of the sleep they have. Predictable and calming routines help children to transition to sleep more easily. Some strategies for transitions may include the use of quiet and restful activities such as reading or listening to soft music.

In planning provisions for sleep, rest, and relaxation consider:

- When sleep, rest, and relaxation opportunities are available.
- How to meet the needs of children who require sleep at different times of the day.
- Strategies that could be used to support children to transition to sleep.