

Childhood Sleep Problems

Can I have a glass of water? I'm afraid of the dark. There's a monster under my bed. Children can make up many excuses not to go to, or stay in, bed. And parents find just as many reasons why they need to get some shut-eye. Some childhood sleep problems are caused by poor sleep habits, while others may be hereditary or symptoms of emotional difficulties. Fortunately, children typically outgrow sleep problems so they – and their parents – can get a good night's rest.

The amount of sleep children need gradually decreases as they mature. Newborn babies usually nap about 16 to 20 hours through the day and night, while teenagers need about nine hours of sleep per night. For many parents, getting their children to go to bed and stay there can be quite frustrating. But they can help head off bedtime troubles by following these simple steps.

- Stick to the same bedtime every night, even on weekends.
- Turn off the television, video games and computer at least 30 minutes before going to bed and start winding down with a consistent routine that includes brushing teeth, going to the bathroom and maybe reading a short story.
- Make sure the place to sleep is comfortable.
- If the child gets up, return them to bed right away.
- If the child continues to cry, wait a little longer before checking on them.

Some childhood sleep problems called parasomnias have been linked to immaturity of the central nervous system and are typically outgrown. Examples of these disorders include night terrors, sleepwalking and sleeptalking. Other night-time sleep problems commonly experienced by children include nightmares and bedwetting.

Night terrors involve episodes of fear, flailing or screaming that can last a few minutes while the child is asleep. They affect only a small number of children between the ages of four and 12 and usually are outgrown by adolescence. Sleepwalking typically starts between the ages of six and 12. Children who sleepwalk may look like they are awake, but actually they are sleeping and may be at risk for injury by falling down stairs or opening windows. When sleep talking, speech is characteristically mumbled and unintelligible. Both night terrors and sleepwalking tend to run in families and affect boys more than girls. Parents should not try to wake children up, but instead guide them back to bed or otherwise gently reassure them.

Nightmares may affect girls more than boys and cause disturbing dreams resulting in fear or anxiety. They tend to begin in childhood and gradually decrease around age 10. Bedwetting, which is often hereditary, usually goes away on its own and is not caused by any deeper medical or emotional issue. Parents need to be supportive and provide positive reinforcement to help their child feel better until the problem is outgrown.

Not getting enough sleep for children can lead to decreased attentiveness and short-term memory, delayed response time and erratic performance. For more information about childhood sleep problems, talk with your doctor.