Managing sleep problems in babies

Parent handouts

2008 – 2010
Your baby usually needs the same amount of sleep from one day to the next.

Other babies you know may need different amounts of sleep.

Both adults and babies cycle through ‘deep’ and ‘light’ sleep during the night.

The first few hours of your baby’s sleep is usually deep sleep.

The rest of the night is usually lighter sleep – this is when babies usually wake up.

Waking overnight is normal, but it can cause problems when your baby can’t get back to sleep without your help.

The way your baby is put to sleep in the beginning of the night is the way they expect to fall back to sleep again in the middle of the night.

If your baby is put to sleep by rocking in your arms or having a bottle, they will expect to be rocked or fed back to sleep when they wake overnight. If your baby falls asleep in the lounge room, they will wonder why they are now in their cot when they wake overnight.

When your baby wakes up and finds that things have changed, they will call out to let you know.

Things to know about your baby’s sleep
(for babies 6 months and over)

The first step to help your baby sleep through the night, is to teach your baby how to fall asleep on their own at the beginning of the night.

You need to put your baby in their cot awake. This way, babies learn to fall asleep by themselves. Your baby will not learn to fall asleep by themself if you do it for them.

Usually, when your baby has learnt to fall asleep by themself at the start of the night, they can get back to sleep without your help during the night.

It takes 3 to 14 days to change a baby’s sleep patterns, just as it takes a few days for adults to get over jet lag (when our sleep patterns are changed).

After 6 months of age, most babies do not need to be fed during the night. Routines can be changed so that your baby has enough milk during the daytime.

You can change your baby’s sleep pattern but remember – they are likely to protest for the first few nights until they get used to the change. Sleep will then improve for everyone!
Night feeding

After 6 months of age, babies do not need to feed during the night. Most babies can get enough milk and food during the day.

If your baby is still feeding overnight and this is a problem for you, here’s what you can do:

**Breast-fed babies:**

1. If the baby’s feed is short (less than 5 minutes) you can stop the feed altogether and re-settle your baby with the settling techniques you have learnt.

2. If your baby’s feed is longer than 5 minutes, you can gradually cut down on the time your baby spends feeding over 5-7 nights.
   - Time the length of your baby’s usual night feed.
   - Then cut down on the time your baby spends feeding by 2-5 minutes every second night.
   - Once your baby is feeding for 5 minutes or less, stop the feed altogether.
   - Re-settle your baby after each shortened feed with the settling techniques you have learnt.
   - For example, if your baby usually feeds for 15 minutes, you would feed for 13 minutes for 2 nights then 11 minutes for the next 2 nights, then 9 minutes for the next 2 nights etc.
   - You can cut down the time faster, e.g. by 5 minutes every 2 nights.

**Bottle-fed babies:**

1. If the baby is having 60 mls of milk or less, you can stop the feed altogether and re-settle your baby with the settling techniques you have learnt.

2. If your baby’s feed is more than 60 mls, you can gradually cut down on the amount your baby drinks over 5-7 nights.
   - Cut down the volume of milk by 20–30 mls every second night.
   - Once your baby is drinking 60 mls or less, stop the feed altogether.
   - Re-settle your baby after each smaller feed with the settling techniques you have learnt.
   - For example, if your baby usually drinks 180 mls, you would give 150 mls for 2 nights then 120 mls for the next 2 nights, then 90 mls for the next 2 nights etc.
Daytime sleep

- 85 to 90% of infants will have a daytime nap.
- Naps usually last 1 to 2 hours. Some infants will sleep longer but up to a quarter nap for less than an hour.

Night time sleep

- Most infants at this age go to bed between 6.00pm and 10.00pm.
- Most infants take less than 30 minutes to get to sleep but about 10% take longer.
- About 60% of infants wake at least once during the night and need an adult to settle them back to sleep. About 1 in 10 infants will do this 3–4 times a night.
- Waking up is partly related to the child’s worry about being separated from their parent. Overcoming this worry is normal and necessary for all children as a step to becoming more independent.
- More than a third of parents report problems with their baby’s sleep at this age.

What happens after 1 year of age

- Some toddlers start to resist going to sleep at night, preferring to stay up with their family. This problem tends to occur especially around 18 months of age. It is the most common sleep problem reported by parents, and tends to improve with age.
- After 1 year of age, children tend to sleep better and less than 5% of 2 year olds wake 3 or more times overnight.
Dummies

Dummies can cause problems if your baby needs one to fall asleep. Some babies will wake overnight and will not stop crying until you come to put the dummy back in.

If you do not want your baby to have a dummy during the night, you can:

1. **Get rid of the dummy**
2. **Slowly reduce your baby’s need for the dummy to fall asleep.**
   - Only use the dummy at sleep time or if really needed (e.g. crying in the car).
   - Try patting or talking to your baby for a minute or two before giving them the dummy.
   - Put the dummy in your baby’s hand. Gently move the dummy to your baby’s mouth. This will help them learn to do it by themselves.
   - If your baby spits the dummy out, remove it and re-offer the dummy the next time you enter the baby’s room. Try to get your baby to put the dummy in by themselves.
   - Each day, increase the amount of time you wait before offering the dummy until your baby learns to fall asleep without the dummy. For example:

   **If you are using the controlled comforting technique:**
   - On the second day, wait until the second time you go into your baby’s room to soothe them before offering them the dummy.
   - On the third day, wait until the third time you go into your baby’s room to soothe them before offering them the dummy.

   **If you are using the camping out technique:**
   - On the first day, wait 2 minutes before giving your baby the dummy.
   - On the second day, wait 4 minutes before giving your baby the dummy.
   - On the third day, wait 6 minutes before giving your baby the dummy.

Continue waiting another 2 minutes each day until you reach 10 minutes, and then only use the dummy if it is really hard to settle your baby.