

## Managing Your Child's Sleep Part One

Teaching your child how to sleep on his/her own can feel like a daunting task, especially for already exhausted and overwhelmed parents. The process of helping a child learn self-soothing skills, and eventually falling asleep, can be emotionally stressful for many parents because it involves taking a firm stance in reaction to the child's protests. The great news is a child, regardless of age, learns this skill very quickly (usually in less than 5 days). Once this skill has been learned, it is like riding a bike - it is always there. As long as you remain consistent with your expectation that your child fall asleep on his/her own then negative sleep associations will not redevelop.

However, healthy sleep *habits* are managed, not a one-time fix. This is especially true the first five to six years of life when a child will move from bassinet to crib to a big kid bed. There are three specific areas that generally disrupt a child's sleep over these years, thereby necessitating "management" from the parents: achieving developmental milestones, dropping a nap and moving from a crib to a bed.

### Developmental Milestones

Many times babies will develop problems with sleep between six and nine months of age. This is even true for those babies that were sleeping well up to this point. It is believed that these problems arise because of the cognitive and physical developments that are occurring at this time. Children become more socially aware and are learning how to manipulate their bodies more. It is common for a child to learn how to roll over on his stomach some time before learning to roll back. Some children will do this while they sleep and will enjoy sleeping on their tummy while others will wake and cry out in frustration. Another common example is a child that learns how to pull herself to a stand, but does not yet know how to sit. When a parent puts this infant to bed she will pull up to a stand and cry out for help to sit back down. Of course, when parents continue to go in and roll over their baby or help their child sit this can quickly become a great game for the child!

Parents can handle these issues in different ways, but a plan needs to be decided upon before the night begins. Sticking with the plan throughout the night is just as critical. Some parents choose to continue to help their child until the child learns the necessary skill (i.e., roll over or going from a stand to a sit). Usually within a month the child is able to take care of himself again. However, this can feel too exhausting for other parents. The quicker solution is to let the child figure it out independently at night. For example, if a child rolls onto his stomach

then the child will either learn to roll back over or sleep on his tummy. The same holds for a child pulling up to a stand. Eventually the child will let go, fall down and go to sleep. This is perfectly safe in a crib. Many parents will check on their child at intervals without physically helping the child out of his "pickle".

### *Dropping Naps*

It is important that parents understand age appropriate sleep habits. A very young baby takes four or more naps a day. Over her first two years, she will slowly drop naps until she is only taking one. Knowing when your child is at an age to drop a nap is half the battle. When your child reaches this point then it is important to understand there may be an awkward period when the absence of the dropped nap leaves her too tired. If timed right, this period should be less than two weeks. For more information on naps please visit [www.childworks.com](http://www.childworks.com)

### *Crib to Big Kid Bed*

Moving from a crib to a bed is painless for many families, while others struggle with nighttime battles once their child is out of a crib. Timing is important and a consistent plan is essential. It is not recommended to move a child to a bed before the age of two unless absolutely necessary due to safety concerns. Ideally, the child should have the verbal skills and acumen to understand the "rules" of moving into a bed.

Other situations can affect a child's sleep habits as well. They include, vacation/travel, illness, moving, and social engagements. When any of these disruptions occur it is best to protect the sleep schedule as much as possible. Try to fit in most naps on vacation or put your child to bed earlier at night. Skipping naps and going to bed late is usually a recipe for an emotionally chaotic vacation. As for getting your child back on schedule, it's imperative to do this ***as soon as possible***. The day your child is no longer sick or the day you return home from traveling, immediately return to the original sleep schedule and expectations. Your child may protest, but if you stand firm and consistent it will be short lived.

Once your child has learned the skill of falling asleep on her own then it is up to you to do continual maintenance to ensure she gets the sleep she needs in order to be healthy. To assure continued success, it is important to adjust your child's schedule in an age appropriate manor and according to his need for sleep ***not*** what he ***wants*** (like, "I don't want to nap!") or trying to determine sleep according to what best fits the family. Immediately returning to the normal sleep schedule when it has been disrupted is essential. If you do these things then you will

minimize the bedtime battles. Your child will know exactly what is expected of her, which will give her a sense of security and safety.