Government of **Western Australia**
Child and Adolescent Health Service

Tips for healthy sleep

Toddlers 18-24 months

Perth Children's Hospital and
Neonatology King Edward Memorial Hospital



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Key messages

Sleep is important for **wellbeing, growth and development**.

The pre-school years are **often exhausting** for parents and caregivers.

Many families **struggle with their toddler's sleep**.

Most sleep issues in babies and toddlers are **behavioural**.

Some sleep issues may be caused by a **health issue**.

There are **evidence based practical strategies** for parents and caregivers to try to help their toddler sleep better.

This guide provides **practical strategies** for parents and caregivers to try to help their toddler sleep better.

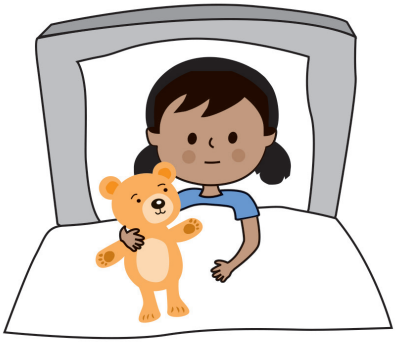
Who is this guide is for?

This guide is for families who would like **evidence based and practical strategies** to support their child to build lifelong healthy sleep habits. The purpose is to help your child to become self-regulated and independent in sleep. This has been shown to reduce parental/caregiver stress and improve the mental health of carers, particularly mothers.

The guide also contains information on the reasons **your child might be struggling with sleep**.

Remember most sleep problems in early childhood are behavioural, however, **some may be due to medical reasons** which may need follow up.

Toddlers and sleep



At 2 years old, your toddler is **curious, energetic, and full of personality**. They still need plenty of sleep to fuel their growth and development.

They will need **11-14 hours of total sleep including naps per day**.

This age can bring new sleep challenges, from bedtime battles to nighttime waking. **Every toddler is different.**

Some are great sleepers; others need a little more help. If you are finding your toddler's sleep difficult, you are not alone.

Sleep issues are very common in early childhood, and many families go through the same thing.

Every family is different and there are many approaches to helping your child sleep better, even if your childmay have other difficulties. **Warmth and consistency are the key!**



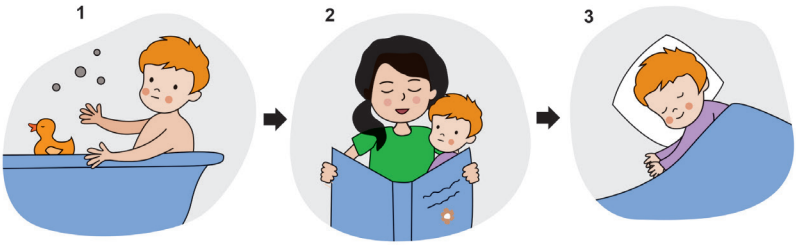
Although it might be a bumpy ride at times, the SLEEPPSS* approach (outlined below) **provides a good foundation for healthy sleeping** for all children.

*SLEEPSS has been developed by Dr D. Goel, PCH Consultant in consultation with Sleep specialists, Neonatal specialists, community health and consumers feedback.

8 sleeping tips: SLEEPPSS*

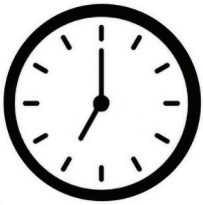
1. Set a bedtime routine

- A consistent, calming routine (e.g. bath, brush teeth, book, cuddle, bed) to help your toddler know it is time to wind down.



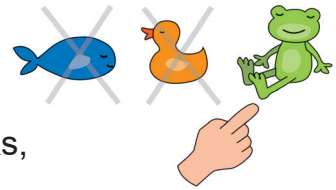
2. Lock in bedtime and wake time

- Having a regular routine helps toddlers feel safe and sleep better. Set a regular bedtime, which suits your family.
- Aim for bedtime between 6.30pm-8.00pm, and aim for a consistent wake-up time.

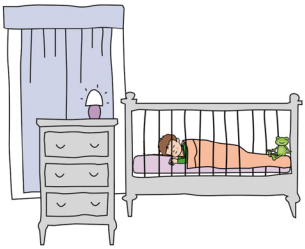


3. Encourage and empower with choices, not control

- Toddlers love independence. Let them choose between two pyjamas, or between two age-appropriate bedtime books, but stick to the routine



4. Ensure safe sleep



- Have a quiet, low-lit room
- Give your toddler familiar sleep items (blanket, teddy)
- Keep your toddler's cot or bed free of distractions (no loud toys, bright lights, or pillows if in cot)
- A nightlight can be helpful for toddlers who are afraid of the dark.
- Avoid screens and active play 1 hour before bed.

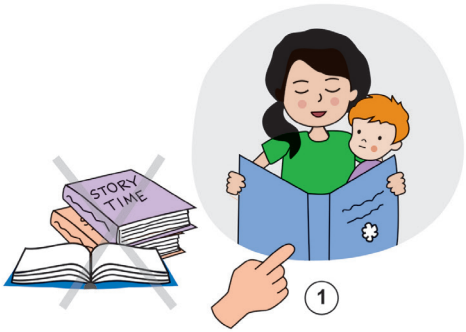
5. Peaceful night-time responses and positive reinforcement



- When your toddler for goes to bed calmly and stays in bed during the night, reward their good sleep behaviour with praise or a small reward, like a sticker or liked activity.

6. Prevent delay tactics

- Prevent delay tactics by keeping firm boundaries but stay calm. Keep it short and kind. Offer one drink, one hug, one story — then lights out.



7. Spot sleepy signs: avoid overtiredness

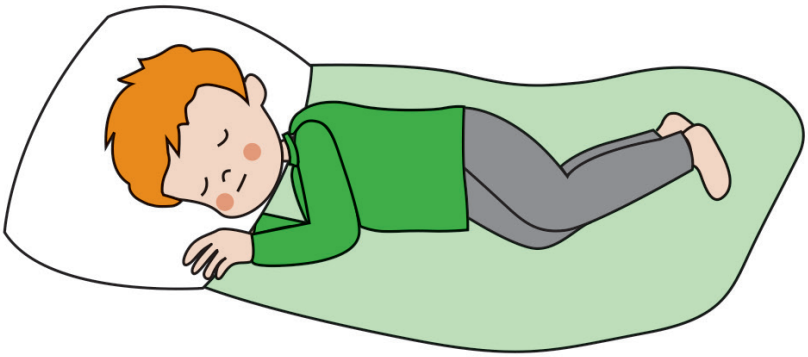
- Look for sleepy signs such as rubbing eyes, yawning, losing interest in play.
- Overtired toddlers can become irritable and struggle to fall asleep.



8. Stay patient and consistent

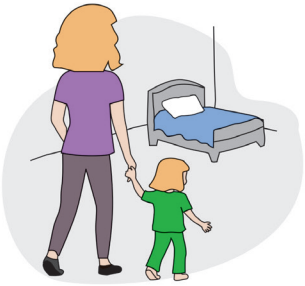
- Sleep issues may take time to resolve. It's important to remain calm, consistent, and patient as your toddler adjusts to healthy sleep habits.

If you are co-parenting, **share your bedtime routines and strategies** with the other parent or caregivers so your toddler has consistency.



Behavioural sleep issues

Separation anxiety



Many 2-year-olds experience separation anxiety, especially around bedtime. They may resist going to bed, or cry when separated from parents or caregivers.

Calling out during the night



Many 2-year-olds **wake up during the night** and may call for their parents. This could be because they have not developed skills to self-soothe back to sleep.

Nightmares and Night Terrors:



Around the age of 2 years, **toddlers begin to have more vivid dreams**, and this may lead to nightmares. Nightmares can be distressing. Night terrors, which are different, **can cause your toddler to appear terrified or scream while still asleep** with no memory of the dream.

Resisting bedtime (stalling or procrastination)

At this age, **toddlers may resist bedtime** with behaviours like asking for another drink, another story, or insisting they are not tired. They are exploring their independence and will do anything to delay sleep.

Strategies to try

- Be **patient and calm** when your toddler expresses distress.
- Offer a **comfort object** like a favourite blanket or stuffed animal.
- **Avoid giving in to demands** like staying in the room until they fall asleep. If you go back in to comfort them, keep it brief and consistent.
- Use a **night light** to help your toddler.
- Try telling them that **you will come back** and check on them.
- If waking in middle of night, consider a **"gentle return" to bed** method where you comfort your toddler without picking them up, then gradually reduce your presence in their room over time.
- Teaching your toddler to **self-settle at the start of the night** helps them to **self-settle through the night**.
- Build a consistent habit of your **toddler going to sleep in the place where your toddler will sleep** for the night. It is best if this is their own bed or cot.
- Remember to **praise your toddler**, use a reward system keeping the rewards small and frequent. **Stickers** often work well.
- **Avoid bringing your toddler to your bed** unless necessary, as this can reinforce the habit of waking up and seeking parental presence.
- **Comfort your toddler** if they wake up frightened after a nightmare.
- For night terrors, it is important **not to wake your toddler** during the event. Simply ensure they are safe and wait for the episode to pass (they usually last only a few minutes). It is often best to not discuss them with your toddler, as this may lead to anxiety. Overtiredness can make night terrors worse.



Transitioning from naps



Most toddlers still have an afternoon nap until 3 years of age, however around age 2 years, **some toddlers may begin to drop or resist** their afternoon nap. This can result in overtiredness and difficulty falling asleep at night.

What to try:

- If your toddler still needs a nap, **ensure it is at the same time each day** and not too late in the afternoon.
- If your toddler is dropping their nap, **bedtime might need to be earlier** to account for the lost daytime sleep.
- **Watch for signs of tiredness** in the early afternoon and try to encourage quiet time, even if your toddler does not sleep

Prepare for setbacks

- Over time, most children will learn to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- However, some things you try may work for a time and then they stop working.
- **Setbacks can happen** for several reasons including illness, short term changes in routine, changes at home and developmental shifts.
- Remember, **at times of illness** your toddler may need a slightly different approach.
- You may find that when you resume your routine after an illness it may feel challenging for a while. Things will get better over time. Be gentle on yourself and on your toddler.

Signs of a medical sleep issue

Most toddler sleep problems are about behaviour. But sometimes they can be caused by health issues. **Talk to your doctor** if your toddler:



- **Snores loudly** most nights
- Stops breathing for short moments or gasps while sleeping or during sleep.
- **Sweats excessively**, wakes often, or moves around a lot in sleep.
- Breathes through their mouth, drools a lot, or often has a blocked nose or tonsil problems.
- Is consistently **overtired**, cranky, or struggles to pay attention during the day.

Doctors use a checklist called **BEARS** developed by Owens and Dalzell (2005)[1] to ask about a toddler's sleep. The table on the next page shows what each letter in BEARS means and gives examples. The table also compares each of the steps in the checklist to possible behavioural causes.

[1] Owens, J. A., & Dalzell, V. (2005). Use of the 'BEARS' sleep screening tool in a pediatric residents' continuity clinic: A pilot study. Sleep Medicine, 6, 63–69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2004.07.015

BEARS Checklist

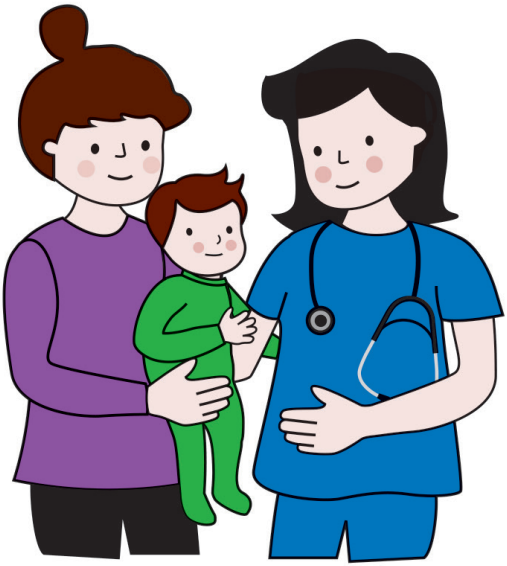
Pre-school (2-5 years)

BEARS checklist	Could Be Medical Problem?	Could Be Behavioural Problem?
Bedtime problems - Does your toddler have any problems going to bed?	Yes	Yes SLEEPPSS can help
Excessive daytime sleepiness - Does your toddler seem over tired or sleepy a lot during the day?	Yes	Yes SLEEPPSS can help
Awakenings during the night - Does your toddler wake a lot at night?	Yes	Yes SLEEPPSS can help
Regularity and duration of sleep - Does your toddler have a regular bedtime and wake time? What are they?	Doctor needs information to see if your toddler is getting enough sleep	Yes, if irregular bed and wake up time SLEEPPSS can help
Sleep-disordered breathing - Does your toddler snore a lot or have difficulty breathing at night?	Yes	No behavioural reasons: talk to your doctor

Referrals for medical review

If you have **tried the SLEEPPSS* approach and other behavioural strategies**, and you or your GP are concerned your toddler may have a medical sleep issue, **your GP can refer your toddler to**:

- Perth Children's Hospital (PCH) **Sleep Clinic** through the Central Sleep Referral system. This clinic can assess your toddler's breathing and sleep in more detail, or
- PCH **Ear Nose and Throat (ENT)** Clinic. The clinic can assess for airway problems as a cause for sleep issues, or a **private paediatric sleep physician** or ENT surgeon.



Sleep resources

There are good resources on sleep available to support you and your family.

Ngala provides information and advice for parents and caregivers. Scan the QR code to visit the Ngala website.

Ngala provides a **Parenting Line** which is open 8am-8pm for advice on parenting challenges including sleep issues. Ngala can also provide **evidence informed sleep support** from a team of qualified professionals to help you with common sleep challenges. The number is **(08) 9368 9368**.

You might want to enrol in a **free intervention** hosted by Ngala that aims to strengthen your relationship with your child while helping your child to regulate behaviours and emotions. Scan the QR code for more information.

Other **helpful links** include:

Australian Government's Raising Children Network

Sleep resources from Royal College of General Practitioners

Australian Sleep Health Foundation

You are not alone

Remember, **every child is different**. Some are great sleepers; others need a little more help.

What matters most is you and your child are supported and well.

You are doing an amazing job.

If you are **feeling overwhelmed there are people to help** you such as your community health nurse, your GP or Ngala. Contact family, friends and community supports for help.



If you need to **talk to someone** about your concerns for your child and for yourself, contact **Ngala's Parenting Line on (08) 9368 9368** between 8am and 8pm.

You could also reach out to **Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636** or **online at www.beyondblue.org.au**

If you think you may shake or hurt your baby or hurt yourself – put baby in a safe place, like in a cot, and get help immediately by contacting **Crisis Care on 1800 199 008.**



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