



Sleep Toolkit for birth to five years

Guidance and support aimed at parents and carers, and those working with families with babies and young children

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Introduction – the importance of sleep

We all do it – but how much do you know about what happens when we sleep?

Sleep is essential for our bodies- a lack of sleep can be harmful and can cause difficulties with our physical and psychological wellbeing.

Sleep is the way that our bodies process what has happened during the day and recharge our energy.

Sleep is a state of reduced awareness that is relatively easy to reverse (unlike a coma or hibernation). Some awareness of the environment around us remains during sleep, particularly our responses to sound (for example, a mother will hear her baby crying but may not wake to the sound of cars passing outside).

In humans, sleep is usually associated with having our eyes closed and laying down – although not always!

A few symptoms of not getting enough sleep (sleep deprivation) are:

- Concentration difficulties
- Growth hormone issues
- Mental health issues
- Lowering of the immune system
- Hyperactivity
- Weight gain
- Behavioural issues
- Difficulty remembering things

Parents who are disturbed by their child’s poor sleep patterns are also likely to suffer from sleep deprivation.

Source:

Tham, E. K., Schneider, N., & Broekman, B. F. (2017). Infant sleep and its relations with cognition and growth: a narrative review.

Wolfson AR, Carskadon MA. (2003) *Understanding adolescents' sleep patterns and school performance: a critical appraisal. Sleep Med Rev.*

Cassoff J, Bhatti JA, Gruber R. (2014) *The effect of sleep restriction on neurobehavioural functioning in normally developing children and adolescents: insights from the Attention, Behaviour and Sleep Laboratory.*

Who has produced this toolkit?

This toolkit was produced in partnership with: School Health Nursing, Sirona care & health, Kings' Forest Primary School, King's Oak Academy Primary School, Off the Record, South Gloucestershire Council - Public Health & Wellbeing, Early Years Team, Educational Psychology, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.



South Gloucestershire Sleep Toolkits

There are three other Sleep toolkits, categorised by age group, available on the [South Gloucestershire Council website](#). The three toolkits are:

Childhood - Five to 13 years

Adolescence - 13- to 18-year-olds

Children with Special Educational Need and Disability – Children with SEND

The Sleep Cycle

At nighttime we experience different levels of sleep, and we sleep in cycles. The stages of a sleep cycle are:

Non-Rapid Eye Movement (Non-REM)

Stage 1 - a very light sleep, where you will be easily woken. If you have ever tried tip toeing out of your child's bedroom and they've woken this is why – they were in a very light sleep.

Stage 2 - still quite a light sleep but the body is preparing for the deep sleep that is about to come. Your child will be more relaxed now and if you are trying to sneak out of their bedroom this is a good time to make your exit!

Stage 3 - this is a very deep sleep. The body needs this sleep so that repair can take place. It will be difficult to wake your child when they are in this stage.

Rapid eye movement (REM stage)

Sleep then moves into a phase of Rapid Eye Movement (REM stage). REM stage sleep is when dreams occur. It is vital for mental and emotional development. Brains can become very active during REM sleep yet out bodies are relaxed. See Figure 1: Non-Rapid Eye Movement (Non-REM) and Rapid Eye movement (REM) stages.

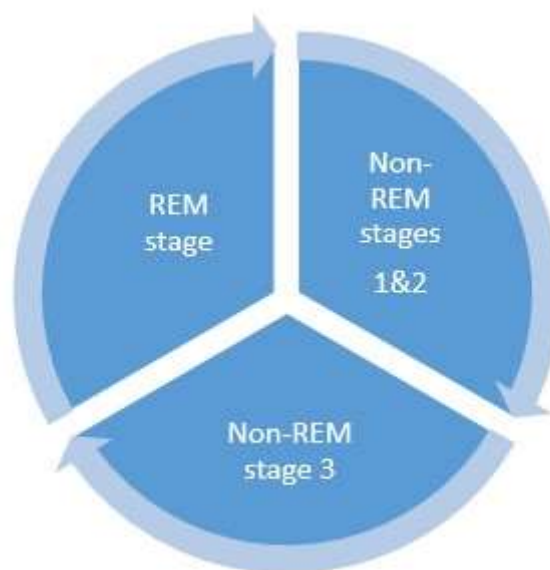


Figure 1

Each cycle usually lasts for around 90 minutes and is slightly shorter for infants (45-60 mins). The sleep cycles occur throughout the night. We are usually in deep sleep towards the beginning of the night and lighter sleep in the early hours of the morning.

After each cycle we come to a point of partial waking (the red bars on figure 2). If everything is as it was when we fell asleep, we may well just roll over and carry on sleeping as in figure 2:

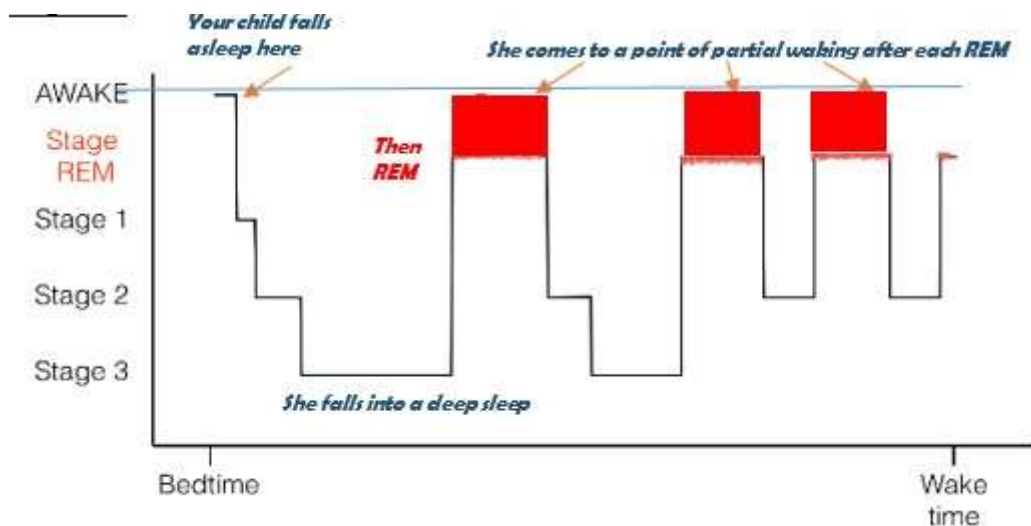


Figure 2: Source: Sleep Training, Southampton

If anything has changed however.....that's when we wake up, as described in figure 3:

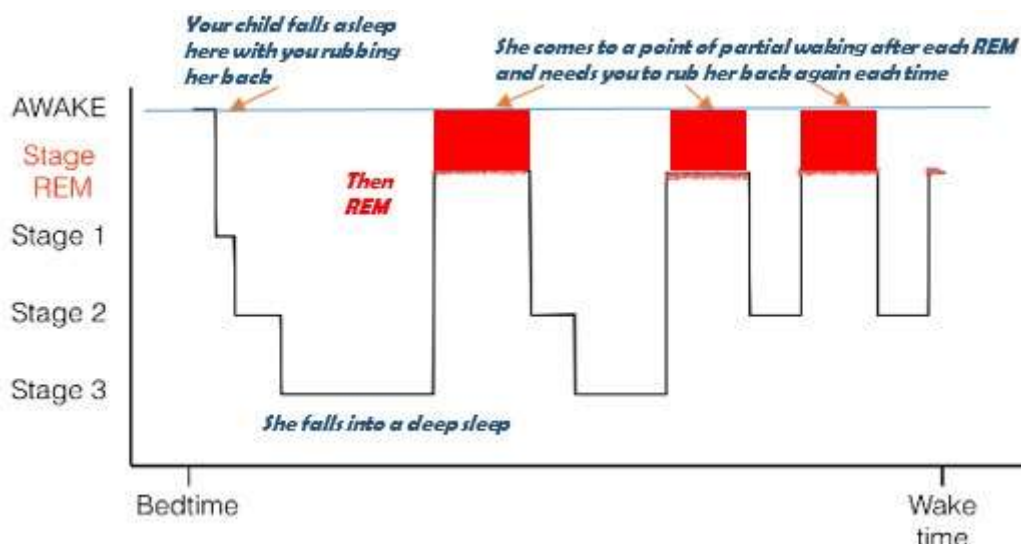


Figure 3: Source: Sleep Training, Southampton

It is important for sleep conditions to remain similar throughout the night as connecting sleep cycles is about waking and feeling safe and secure enough to drift back off to sleep. This often happens when children are developmentally ready and have a secure environment. Infants often need parental input to fall asleep and connect their sleep cycles as they are not developmentally ready to 'self soothe'.

Circadian Rhythm, often called the 'body clock'

We all have a sleep-wake cycle known as the circadian rhythm or body clock which is regulated by light and dark. The rhythms take time to develop in new-borns and it is very normal for infants and young children to wake regularly during the night.

Babies' sleep patterns mature over the first several years of life, and the sleep architecture of newborns is very different to that of adults. Newborns sleep for 18-20 or so hours a day, but only for 2-3 hours at a time. During the first year, overall sleep duration falls to around 15 hours,

and most of the sleep becomes consolidated during night-time as circadian rhythms develop (Parmelee et al 1964).

For more information for parents and carers on a baby's sleep development click here: [Normal Sleep and 'Sleeping Through' - \(basisonline.org.uk\)](https://www.basisonline.org.uk)

Melatonin

Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone that is produced by the brain, and it plays an important role in supporting the body's circadian rhythm and promoting restful sleep.

Levels of melatonin rise at nighttime making you feel sleepy and drop at dawn causing you to wake, which is why it is sometimes called 'the hormone of darkness'.

The best way of ensuring optimal melatonin production is for your baby to sleep in as dark an environment as possible. Use heavy lined curtains and/or blackout blinds to block out external light.

Source: [Melatonin - The Sleep Charity](https://www.melatonin.org.uk)

How much sleep is needed? Sleep duration

Sleep needs change as children get older and every human requires a different amount of sleep throughout their life. However, there is no set amount, and it varies according to age:

- Newborn babies may sleep up to 19 hours per day
- A 1-2 year older toddler will usually sleep around 11-14 hours per day.
- 6-13 year olds will usually sleep around 9-11 hours
- An adolescent 8-10 hours but this could be as little as 7 hours or as much as 11 hours

Sleep routines, sometimes called 'sleep hygiene'

Sleep Environment

The sleep environment needs to be safe, a comfortable temperature, with space to lie down, low level of noise, low light or darkness and a lack of distractions.

Bedtime routines

Routines can teach older babies to associate a sequence of events e.g., bath, brush teeth, PJs, story time etc. with bedtime and sleep.

Caring for your young child at night

Why is sleep important? What is typical and natural sleep for infants?

This section summarises some key points about infant's sleep and shares some excellent resources where more detailed information can be found.

Sleep is a natural process which allows our bodies to regulate and repair to keep us healthy. In humans, sleep is known to be vital for brain development, processing the day's events and converting learning into long-term memory systems. Sleep moves through REM sleep (in which our brain is very active and vivid dreams occur, especially important for babies and children) and non-REM sleep (in which brains are less active and we slowly fall into a deeper sleep). New-born babies move rapidly in and out of REM and non-REM throughout the night and are in REM sleep for 50% of the night, 20% more than adults!

As part of the natural process, sleep develops in cycles over time, which can vary between individual children. The 'circadian rhythm' is the general sleep/wake cycle most adults follow; however, babies are not born with this established and sleep more at night. On average, this develops from approximately 4 months of age. Many parents find their children's sleep patterns challenging; however, a lot of anxiety is often because we have unrealistic expectations of how infants and children sleep.

Safety factors to consider

It is important to ensure that your infant is safe at night, your midwife or health visitor will be able to discuss safety guidelines with you. Safer sleep guidance can also be found on the Infant Sleep Information Source website or APP (in the "Help & Information" section).

Important new messages in the [UNICEF Guide to Caring for your Baby at Night](#) include:

- Babies should sleep in a clear, flat sleep space which is easy to create in a cot or Moses basket.
- Put your baby on their BACK for every sleep, never on their front or side. No special equipment or products are needed to keep them on their back.
- Keep your baby SMOKE-FREE day and night.
- Babies should not sleep in car seats longer than is necessary.
- Plan for when your baby is gets older. Moses baskets are suitable for very young babies. As they move into a cot or bed make sure they cannot fall out or become trapped between the mattress and wall

Looking after yourself if you are looking after a young child

Caring for a baby or young child can be tiring and so it is important to look after yourself so that you have the energy and capacity to look after your child. Getting positive help and support from friends and family can make a real difference, as can resting in the day or doing some activities with your baby that you find enjoyable. If you feel you are struggling and have limited support, talk to a health professional about your worries.

Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed when our babies cry frequently. Although infant crying is very normal, it is important that you are calm and sensitive when soothing your baby. If you feel very overwhelmed at times, it is important to pause and let yourself re-balance so that you can

respond in a way which is calming and safe. If this is frequently a challenge for you or a member of your family, do let a professional know – there is lots of support available. The following website has good information about feeling overwhelmed and keeping your baby safe, which you may find helpful: [Parents - ICON Cope](#)

Help and Information

For local support and information about infant sleep contact your Health Visitor:

How do I access the service?

By phone 0300 125 5200: You can call your health visiting team at any time during office hours. All teams have an answer machine where you can leave a message if nobody is available to take your call. Contact details are on the Health Visiting page of the community: [Health Visiting Service – Children and Young People’s Services \(sirona-cic.org.uk\)](https://www.sirona-cic.org.uk/health-visiting-service-children-and-young-peoples-services)

In person: You can drop into any of the baby hubs across South Gloucestershire. Baby hubs are friendly drop-ins that offer families support and information around early parenting.

A list of baby hubs can be found at: [List-of-drop-in-Baby-Hubs-BNSSG-winter-2023-final.pdf \(sirona-cic.org.uk\)](https://www.sirona-cic.org.uk/list-of-drop-in-baby-hubs-bnssg-winter-2023-final.pdf)

Organisations and websites:

- Baby Sleep Information Source: <https://www.basisonline.org.uk/>
- [Caring for your baby at night leaflet - Baby Friendly Initiative \(unicef.org.uk\)](https://www.unicef.org.uk/caring-for-your-baby-at-night)
- NCT [Sleep | Information and support on babies & toddlers | NCT](https://www.nct.co.uk/sleep)
- [Your Baby’s Sleep Patterns - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk/your-babys-sleep-patterns)
- [Lullaby Trust publications - The Lullaby Trust](https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/)

Bedtime Action Plan

This guidance has been adopted by the Health Visiting Service, Portage Team, Early Years Team, and Educational Psychology. It is taken from 'The Gentle Sleep Book' by Sarah Ockwell-Smith.

Bed sharing/co-sleeping

- Be aware of all of the safety guidelines.

Expectations

- How do your expectations compare with the norms of sleep for a child the same age?
- Is bed-time appropriate for their age?
- Are you giving your child sufficient time at home after any pre-school/nursery to allow hormone levels to drop before bedtime routines begin?
- Do you have at least ½ hr of calming bedtime routines that are followed consistently every day?

Diet

- Is your child having a balanced diet, appropriate for their age?
- It may be useful to discuss this with your health visitor.

Transitional objects

- Does your child have a comfort object? This object should be associated with you, so that your child can take comfort from it when you are not there.
- If your child is attached to one object, try to get hold of a second one in case it gets lost.

IT

- How much time does your child spend in front of a screen? Try to avoid screens for 2 hrs before your child needs to sleep.
- Try your best to avoid anything on TV that might cause fear for your child.
- Avoid having a TV in your child's bedroom and minimise other screens in their room too (e.g.- tablets)

Me-time

- How much support do you have from others around you?
- Do you feel you are able to look after yourself?

Environment

- Is the lighting in your house able to dim in the evenings?
- If your child's bedroom is not able to be completely dark at nighttime, consider using red light bulbs.
- Spend time playing in your child's room in the day to associate it as a happy place.
- Avoid disciplining young children using their bedroom, so they do not make negative associations.