



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Sleep and Your Preschooler:

What to Expect and How to Help

Sleep is very important for your child's health and growth. But bedtime can be challenging! If bedtime feels like a battle, you are not alone. Sleep problems are common between age 3 and 5. Knowing why can help.

How much sleep do children need?

Children age 3 to 5 need about 10 to 13 hours of sleep each day.
This may include a nap.

When children do not get enough sleep, you may see:

- More meltdowns and challenging behavior
- Trouble paying attention
- Bigger feelings (or tantrums)

Children manage their emotions better when they've had enough sleep.

Why sleep can be hard

At this age, children have big imaginations. This can make the dark feel scary. Night-time fears are common and normal between age 3 and 5.

Children may not want to stop playing or leave you at bedtime.

Nightmares are common, too, as children work through big feelings from their day. Some children also have night terrors. They are different from nightmares. During a night terror, children may look awake and upset, but they are still asleep. These can be scary to see, but they are generally harmless. Most children grow out of them.



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What helps healthy sleep

A **bedtime routine** helps children sleep better. Children fall asleep faster and sleep longer when **the same calm steps happen in the same order each night**. A routine can be simple, like a bath, pajamas, brushing teeth, a book, and a song. Your child's bedtime routine does not need to be long. About 20 to 30 minutes is enough.

Turning off screens at least one hour before bed also helps. The light from screens can make it harder for the brain to know it is time to sleep.

You can use a dim nightlight if your child is afraid of the dark. Or let them sleep with a special stuffed animal or one of your T-shirts to help them feel safer. When your child is scared at night, respond calmly and warmly. A gentle voice, a quick check-in, and doing the same thing each time helps your child feel safe.

A final thought

Sleep problems at this age are usually temporary. Keeping a steady routine at bedtime really helps. When your child is scared, respond with understanding. Give them tools to manage their fears. If sleep problems continue or start to affect daily life, ask your pediatrician for advice.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider
or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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