

# Is your child getting **enough sleep**?

Sleep is vital for good health and general wellbeing, and this is especially true for toddlers, says **Yvonne Gavan**. But all too often it becomes a touchy subject – especially when your toddler employs delaying tactics or refuses to stay in bed.

**T**here are lots of things you can do to ensure your child is relaxed and happy about bedtime. But the first thing to consider is just how much sleep they should be getting in the first place.

## NOT ENOUGH?

Falling asleep every time they get in the car, being cranky and irritable and needing to be woken in the morning are all possible signs that your toddler isn't getting enough sleep and needs to develop better bedtime habits.

"We often expect children to sleep longer than they need to at this age," says baby and child sleep therapist and co-author of *Teach your Child to Sleep*, Mandy Gurney. "This then causes the 'but I'm not tired' problem when it comes to bedtime."

Once they've made the transition from baby to toddler, the amount of sleep children need drops from 14 to 12 hours a day, including naps. Although the afternoon nap is something most mums cherish, saying goodbye to daytime sleep does have its benefits. "Most children want to drop their nap at around age three," says Gurney. "But this means that night-time sleep increases to 12 hours a night, giving you that extra golden hour either in the evening or first thing in the morning."

## WINDING DOWN

Most toddlers resist bedtime at night and need you to help them establish a good evening routine.

"It all comes down to developing good habits," says Gurney, "so once it gets to early



## TOP TIP

### Dim the lights

In order to feel sleepy, we need to reduce the amount of light that we're exposed to via the dim light receptors (DLRs) in our eyes. Install a blackout blind over your child's window and add ambient lighting, such as dimmer switches, a warm-glow night-light, or magical fairy lights to help create the right atmosphere.

evening, about 5pm, help your toddler start to wind down for the evening by keeping the mood calm and relaxed."

This means avoiding too much stimulation, so it's best to switch from watching lively TV programmes, 'rough and tumble' play or playing with noisy toys to calmer activities such as reading books, drawing pictures, listening to music or doing jigsaw puzzles.

Supper also plays an important role in the wind down to bedtime. According to Mandy, one of the first things you should consider is the kind of food you are offering at the end of the day.

Combine carbohydrates, such as potatoes or pasta, which have a calming effect, with foods that contain tryptophan, such as cheese, milk, yoghurt, eggs, turkey and bananas, which increase levels of the sleep-inducing hormone, melatonin, in the brain.

Finally, your child's bedtime routine should include some soothing activities such as a calming bath, reading together and perhaps singing a lullaby.

## THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

For some toddlers, the transition from cot to bed may be a difficult one. "If your child keeps hopping in and out of bed, try to distinguish why," Gurney advises. If it's simply a case of enjoying their new found freedom, then she recommends a technique known as door shutting.

"Each time your child gets out of bed you take them back without making eye contact or speaking to them and shut the door for up to a minute," she says. "Then you open the door and let them know gently but firmly that they need to stay in bed."

If your child's problem is anxiety, try something different. "A toddler's imagination really goes into overdrive at this age,"

says Gurney, "and they may start complaining of monsters or ghosts. If they're afraid of going to sleep by themselves, sit with them until they go to sleep and then gradually, over the course of a week, move a bit further from the bed until they're happy to drift off without you there."

## BE CONSISTENT

Your toddler will be relying on you to stick to the routine. This helps them to learn boundaries and also encourages feelings of security. It might not seem easy at first, but before long your toddler will come to expect the routine and it may become a part of the day that both look forward to.

"It's also important that you're calm," adds Gurney. "Your child will take emotional cues from you so try not to rush them, no matter how much you're longing to get them to bed and put your feet up. Give yourself plenty of time, and try to enjoy it."