

# Toddlers: Settling and sleep for 1 to 3 year olds.

“If I had a favourite age it would be that – because they’re so funny, apart from anything else.” Penelope Leach – about toddlers<sup>i</sup>

**A**walking, talking little person adds a whole new dimension to sleep and settling. Toddlers can run away, they can argue about sleep time and their busy minds and bodies can sometimes find it very hard to settle down and sleep. In the previous two chapters we discussed baby sleep and settling. Hopefully, if you’ve been having difficulties with your baby’s sleep, they have either resolved or are starting to diminish. In this chapter we revisit normal toddler sleep, because, once again unrealistic expectations can cause all sorts of problems. We also look at toddler settling ideas, questions you may have about toddler sleep (like what time should they go to bed, and ‘own bed transition’), and sleep problems that can emerge after 12 months.

## Toddler sleep patterns

Your baby turning one can bring all sorts of expectations. Perhaps now they will be easier to manage and sleep better. Anni recalls with each of her children, thinking that one would somehow bring greater independence, however, a one year old is still doing what they did yesterday, and changes tend to be very gradual.

In terms of sleep you can expect that your toddler has a regular bedtime, but this will probably get a little later over time. They will almost certainly get up early, tending to wake when it is light. Night waking and calling for you (or coming into your bed), is still very common and normal, right up until 3 years and beyond. The reasons for night waking can include nightmares, separation anxiety and needing reassurance, as well as all the usual physical things like tummy upsets, colds, itchy things or loud noises. If you’re breastfeeding and co-sleeping, you can expect your toddler to wake up and feed, unless you do something to change this association.

### Naps

Toddler naps are a very individual thing. From a parent’s perspective, their toddler having a two hour nap every afternoon can be bliss: time for you to have your own nap, or catch up on some emails and calls without your ‘helper’. As a very general guide, 96% of 18 month olds are still having a nap, but only around a third of four year olds are napping<sup>ii</sup>; day naps can vary in length from about 20 minutes to hours (sometimes in the same toddler in the same week). This means, that at some point you can expect your toddler to drop her nap, but until then, if she is napping when she is tired and waking up ready to go, all is well. Most one year olds are still having a morning and afternoon nap, and this will reduce to one day time nap around 18 months, and then none, as they get older. Although, even for non napping toddlers, many parents and day carers institute a ‘quiet lie down’ time in the afternoon, which has a lot to recommend it!

You will know when your toddler is ready to drop a nap, or the nap, as they will not be particularly tired at their usual nap time, and start getting tired later and later, until it’s actually bed time. The tricky period to negotiate is when they are getting very tired close to bed time, and you have to

choose whether to let them nap and risk a very late bedtime, or keep them up and have to deal with a grumpy toddler. Sometimes you will have no choice about timing, for example, those parents who have found their toddler has fallen asleep on the floor or in their dinner!

### BOX: Being OK with Sleep dependence

The thing about sleep that every parent of a toddler: every child will: sleep in their own bed, put themselves to sleep, go back to sleep when they wake in the night. We promise that this will happen even if you, as parents all over the world and through history, have done, parent your toddlers to sleep, let them sleep near you or come into your bed in the night and soothe them back to sleep when they wake.

So the first thing to say is do not think for a second that you've 'prevented your child from developing healthy sleep habits' by your relaxed attitude. But, we do have to remember, that unforced sleep independence takes time. If you take a laid back approach to sleep you can expect to be parenting to sleep toddlers and have children in your bed up to the age of 3 or 4. You can also expect older children to want to come into your bed, and even older children, right up to teenagers to come and get you if they have a nightmare or can't sleep because they are worried about something. Interestingly, most parents, no matter how they night parent, actually don't have any problem with their older children needing them now and then.

### Bedtimes

Your toddler has probably settled into a regular bedtime, and you'll notice they get tired around the same time each evening. This is likely to change as they get older. Temporary changes often happen if they drop the late nap, and you can have very early bed times, or, if the late nap gets later, and can you have very late bed times (see section above). Also, watch out for the extra special 430am get up, if, for some reason they've conked out at 5pm the night before!

Daylight saving can also push bedtimes right back as it hard for many children to go to sleep when it's still light (and they can hear children playing/leaf blowers/cicadas etc ) Also, your child's sleep needs are gradually decreasing, so you can expect that they will get tired a little later in the evening as they get older. Anni for example, was putting Juno to bed at 6-30 pm from the age of 1 to 2 years, but noticed that around the age of 2, that a 7 pm bedtime worked better. The key with bedtimes is to follow your child's cues. If they are still bouncing around at 7pm, happy and engaged, it is pointless starting your sleep routine until a bit later.

It's also useful for parents to know that bedtimes and amounts of sleep that children have varies hugely across cultures and parenting practices. A cross cultural study found bedtimes varied by nearly 3 hours, with babies and toddlers in Australia and New Zealand having the earliest average bedtimes of 730pm, compared to , twenty past 10 in Hong Kong<sup>iii</sup> The children in late bedtime cultures don't sleep more in the day than Australasian toddlers either – so their total amount of sleep was substantially less. Also, as we have noted before, breastfed, bed-sharing toddlers generally sleep a lot less than children sleeping alone. What these variations show is that there is not some precise amount of sleep your child must have in order to be healthy, but rather if they are going to bed when they are tired and waking up happy and energetic, they are just fine.

### Settling and toddlers

## The number one toddler sleep secret - Make sure they are tired!

Tiring out your toddler is so obvious but sometimes easy to forget: On some days you might be in the car a lot, then with a big shop sitting in the trolley, a visit to your friends, and then some TV and books – and your toddler may not be going to sleep because they are simply not tired. Anni noticed that Juno always slept really well after a day with her dad, because he'd take her swimming and to the park, then they'd do lots of watering and weeding in the garden.

Building in a daily high activity session every afternoon, will really help their sleep. Children in childcare should be getting enough activity, but do check in with your carer what activities they are doing, if, in your opinion, they are still a bit bouncy after day care. For days at home, afternoon activities can be a long walk, a big play in the playground (not just being pushed on the swings), or, if you have to stay indoors, dancing, indoor climbing, and hiding and chasing. Another very excellent tiring technique is to have a couple of older children over to play: your toddler will run around after them, while you have a relaxing cup of tea and a chat.

## Toddler sleep routines

We've talked a fair bit about baby friendly routines. Toddler friendly routines use the same principles: simple, predictable, repeatable, with helping your child to wind down and cueing them for bedtime. Toddler routines don't have to differ much from baby routines, and the bath, pyjamas, cuddle, bed will all work well. Books and stories and songs are also all really nice parts of a sleep routine. It is also important to remember not to overstimulate your toddler in the period before your sleep routine, so turn off the TV and computers, get older children to do quiet activities and give the whole house a 'winding down' feeling.

## BOX – what sort of sleep parent are you?

Parents tend to be of three types: those who like everything to be very structured and predictable, those who are happy to go with the flow, and those somewhere in the middle. Identifying what sort of parenting you feel most comfortable with can really help you identify how you are going to work with your toddler and sleep. If, for example, you need structure, you can identify what your ideal is (e.g. put your toddler to sleep at the same time each night with a clear routine, kiss and cuddle them goodnight, then lights out and off to sleep). Then it is a matter of gradually getting your toddler to be happy with that routine. It might take some time for your child to be happy to be left alone (see the discussion throughout this chapter), but the fact of working systematically to a goal, and in a way that is respectful of your child's needs for closeness, is something that also meets the needs of most structure loving parents (although of course there will be days when even the best laid plans go to the wall – see the 'Days from hell, below')

Alternatively, if you are a laid back parent, you don't have to torment yourself with the idea that you should have more structure and routine in your child's life. If you are putting them to bed when they are tired, and you are happy to cuddle them off to sleep, then that's absolutely fine too. The thing that laid back parents need to be attuned to, is that bedtime methods that work for a while, can stop working for the parent (e.g. the parent keeps falling asleep themselves and waking up about 11pm). In this case, rather than just muddling along, developing a plan of what will work for you and implementing it, is the key to happy bedtime parents.

## Putting your toddler to sleep

At this age, children often like to cuddle or sit near you as they fall asleep. Some mothers are still feeding to sleep, and other parents are rocking in rocking chairs, or walking their toddlers to sleep. Keep doing whatever settling technique you like, and as long as you are happy to do so. If you start to resent it (or you have another baby coming!), you may want to start easing yourself out of the picture. One way to do so is to sit in a chair and read a book while your baby falls asleep (a book light can help you read in a dark room). Gradually begin to slip out of the room now and then, saying, 'I'll be back in a minute, honey' – but make sure you do come back! Eventually you will be able to reassure them from the next room. Remember to be flexible, though; it's not uncommon for children to again need a parent after they have been putting themselves to sleep for a while, especially if they have difficult or upsetting days or need extra comfort and reassurance for some other reason.

As your toddler gets older, some children enjoy listening to a story as a night-time routine, and many still like Mum or Dad to sit or lie down with them. These bedtime cuddles can be lovely, but if you're ready to change the routine, most children will cope if the change happens gradually and if you are sensitive to their need for extra cuddles or time. Story or music and a night-light can help children at this age go to sleep without you.

**BOX: Coping with the settling days from hell**

Maybe once a month, maybe less, maybe more, your toddler will not want to go to sleep at their usual bedtime. It might be because they had an extra long late nap, you have some exciting guests, they didn't get enough running around in the day or maybe naughty Nanna fed them chocolate. Whatever the reason – it's important to recognise what is going on, and act before you and your toddler get upset.

You'll know you're having one of these days, when your toddler is clearly not tired– they keep wriggling and kicking, chatting to you and trying to hop up. You might start to feel annoyed and agitated, or even really cross. These are normal feelings especially as such days tend to happen exactly when you have date night, friends over or some work planned! But rather than getting all tetchy, you need to calmly 'call it quits' and get up with your child. Maybe go for a walk, let them join you at dinner, or read some books, then when they look tired, try to put them to bed again. Alternatively, you can do something really fun. One mother commented about her 2 and a half year old:

*Nate would just not go to sleep one evening a couple of weeks before Christmas. He had gone to sleep at 4 after a big day - and woken up at 8-30 pm and wouldn't resettle. For a moment I had that sinking feeling: 'oh no, party boy til 11 pm'. But then we all got in the car and had a look at the Christmas lights. We hadn't seen them before because he goes to bed when it is still light. We had a great time, Nate was just entranced, and he went to sleep in the car on the way home.*

If these 'not tired days' are happening regularly, you probably need a later bedtime, and may also want to examine whether your toddler is getting enough activity and/or is eating foods that are disrupting their ability to settle down (see food intolerances in Chapter 6) .

### Box: Long term breastfeeding?

Some mothers start breastfeeding and never see a reason to stop until their child self weans. There are a number of really big pluses for feeding into the second, third year or beyond, (and that's not just Mum being able to say yes to that extra slice of cake!). For your child, extended breastfeeding brings the following benefits:

- Continues to provide key nutrients, including essential vitamins
- Reduces the risk of illness
- Reduces the duration of illnesses
- Makes your child smarter
- Helps meet your child's attachment needs
- Improves mental health outcomes

For mum, extended breastfeeding:

- Reduces your risk of breast cancer, and a range of reproductive cancers
- Reduces your risk of other diseases including rheumatoid arthritis, and cardiovascular disease
- Helps you lose weight
- Gives you a fabulous way to connect and settle your child.<sup>iv</sup>

### Moving into baby's own bed - from the cot or family bed

Getting your toddler's very own big bed can be very exciting for everyone. The only problem is keeping them in it, as no cot sides, or no mummy and daddy, can mean lots of hopping out to come and find you.

If you are transitioning from a cot to a bed, you can get your toddler used to their bed by having her take her naps there, and also place familiar items and covers in the bed. Then at bedtime, you may find all is well, and she sleeps as she did in the cot. Alternatively, if she keeps getting up, the best approach is to keep gently putting her back to bed and helping her get back to sleep. One dad commented that the big bed transition was 'like having a new born again!' Eventually, feeling safe and secure in her big bed, will mean returning to

All children who start off sleeping in the family bed eventually move to their own beds – but parents can be ready for the transition well before the children. The key is to make the transition as gentle as possible. Placing your mattress and your baby's mattress side by side on the floor often works, either in your room or baby's room. (See page X for safe sleeping guidelines.)

Alternatively, some children are ready to move into their own beds; they just need the opportunity to do so. Introduce the new bed to your child and make it inviting and cozy. Have them take naps in this bed, and put them to sleep in it at night. If they come into your bed at night, either leave them there (if that's okay) or return them to their bed or a mattress in your room.

## Toddler sleep problems

### Baby problems still affecting your toddler

Colic is supposed to clear up at 3 months and reflux around the age of 12 months, but if the chronic problems that wreck sleep haven't resolved themselves or significantly improved by

now, it is well worth having another good look at what is happening and, if possible, trying some new approaches to help your toddler (see the discussions in Chapter 6). The most probable explanation for chronic difficulties with falling asleep and staying asleep are likely to be physical issues such as continuing acid reflux, food intolerances or allergies.

### Any age problems

In Chapter 6 we ran through a whole host of issues that can affect sleep, things like teething, illnesses, starting day care, a new sibling, a holiday, parents fighting etc etc! Of course all these issues can equally affect toddler sleep. So, if your toddler has been sleeping quite well, and suddenly starts waking up frequently, then there is certainly something going on. Most of the time it will be pretty obvious (e.g. they have a virus and are vomiting everywhere), but other times it can be more subtle. If the latter, teething and ear aches are common culprits. Also, of course, have a good think about your toddler's emotional environment, if for example, they have just started at long day care, it is very common to wake up at night because they haven't seen you all day. Where there is emotional disruption, extra reassurance, cuddles and time spent doing quiet things can all help you reconnect with your toddler and for them to feel safe inside.

### Problems that tend to emerge in toddlerhood

Some problems that occur in babyhood, can also occur as brand new problems in toddlerhood. These include sleep apnoea (so check for this if you have a snorer, or frequent waking with no other explanation). It also can include food intolerances and allergies as you introduce new foods. With food issues, it's always worth having a look at what your child has eaten that day if they are suddenly very restless, difficult and wakeful. Even Anni's model child Zac had a terrible sleeping day once when nearly three, and it wasn't until Anni remembered he'd found a packet of coloured lollies and scoffed them, that she realized why.

### Nightmares and night terrors

Nightmares are very common with toddlers. It could be a realistic scary dream such as losing mummy or having another child snatch a toy from them, or, for an older toddler, books and TV can inspire nightmares about witches, ghosts and dinosaurs – or something like being eaten by a hippo. Children can be really frightened by their nightmares and wake up crying, or just cry a bit in their sleep. But if they do wake up and need you, then lots of cuddling and reassurance will help them go back to sleep. Rafeal Palayo, a professor of sleep medicine and psychiatry recommends telling toddlers that that they are safe and that nightmares and dreams are just like paintings and drawings, rather than being real, and "meaning that they can that they can paint a nice picture or scary picture,". He also suggests dream rehearsal can help children, where you discuss the dream and think of new ending, for example, if your two and a half year old had a dream that someone grabbed her toy, you could talk to her about the child's mummy getting the other child to give it back.

We discussed night terrors in the previous chapter. These are not nightmares but instances when your toddler starts screaming in their sleep, and may start thrashing around or running around the house. Pelayo says if your child is experiencing night terrors, to first rule out snoring, as it destabilizes sleep, making them more likely. Then, as with younger babies, you can try waking your child 15 minutes after she goes to sleep, as this will help her go into a deeper sleep, where the night terrors don't visit as much.

### Bed time refusal

Refusing to go to bed at 'bedtime' is a big issue for parents (even if most of us did the same thing as children!). This can involve fairly low key procrastinating such as wanting more books, a drink, extra visits to the toilet, saying good night to all the pets including each goldfish, or, it can involve big time tantrums about going to bed.

Not having a bedtime does actually solve this issue, as cultures with no bedtimes, not, unsurprisingly, have no bedtime refusal, they just put their child to bed when they are tired or they fall asleep on an adult. However, given this approach doesn't work for most parents in our culture, there are fortunately, several things parents can do that will definitely reduce bedtime refusal.

First, the obvious, but often overlooked by parents (they have to go to bed, my show starts at 7-30!): Is your toddler actually tired? Have they had enough activity in the day? Are they needing a later bedtime now they are a bit older? Have they had a longer than normal nap? If for some reason your toddler isn't tired, the to bed time refusal may be as simple as a temporary or permanently later bed time.

Other things that help toddlers feel happier about going to bed include making the house and their bedroom very boring. Anni finds that Juno really doesn't want to go to bed if her brothers are having a big game of indoor hockey (doh!), so homework is now the order of the day at Juno's bedtime. Dimming the lights, turning off the TV, getting the household to do quiet activities and having a dark bedroom (just with a nightlight) without new or interesting toys will all make bed seem a better option than staying up (or at least equal).

Another reason for bedtime refusal is raised by Professor Peter Gray, a specialist in child development and evolutionary psychology. His view is that young children are protesting not about going to bed per se, but going to bed alone, in the dark, at night. <sup>V</sup>He describes this as an evolutionary mismatch, as children have a deep need to be close to their parents at night (an idea we discussed in chapter 2). As such, the secret to helping children go to bed without protest is to help them feel safe and know that we are around. In this sense, if we either parent our children to sleep, and, if we want to remove ourselves from this, to do so very gradually (see the ideas above). Some suggestions from parents include:

*We put the girls to bed then do quiet activities near their room, things like folding washing, ironing, reading or Sudoku puzzles. That way they know we are around.*

*When I was ready to stop cuddling Jasper off to sleep, we'd do the whole bedtime routine, then give him a big cuddle. Then I'd get up and say, I'll be back in a jsut minute, and I'd go off and put some things in the dishwasher then come back. This would happen maybe 10 times or so, and he'd drift off to sleep.*

Toddler keeps coming into your bed

If a nightly arrival from your toddler is starting to become a problem for you, there are a few things you can do to reduce the amount they disturb you at night. The first thing to recognise that children want to sleep close to their parents, and gently changing this behaviour will take time and sensitivity. You also need to rule out anything that is frightening them or otherwise disturbing their sleep – are they, for example, waking up and feeling frightened of the dark or shadows? Are outside noises waking them up? If this is the case, address these issues, e.g. with a night light, and explain to your toddler that they are safe in their bed, and that if they should

become frightened or have a bad dream that they can always come to you.

Lots of parents are pretty happy to have their toddler in their room, but not their bed. If that's you, then setting up a little bed right near yours can work for years.

If you decide you do want her to stay in her bed all night, then the key is to gently put her back to bed each time she comes to see you. Because she is most likely feeling some separation anxiety about being away from you, this means you need to offer reassurance and perhaps some cuddling and patting so she can go back to sleep feeling all is good in her bed. (Some parents end up falling asleep in the toddler bed, which has pluses and minuses!) Other ideas include having siblings sleep together, or setting a time for when they can come and cuddle in your bed (although do check that she is not waiting awake for a long time in their bed before coming in).

## Key points

- h Toddlers usually have a regular bedtime, but night waking is still common. Younger toddlers will still nap, but expect the naps to drop from two to one to none by around 4 years.
- h Parents can have a range of issues with toddler sleep, mostly around bedtimes, going to bed, and not wanting to stay in their own bed. These issues can be resolved with flexible thinking and making gradual changes.
- h Sleep problems that affect toddlers include many of those that also affect babies, or have persisted from babyhood. They can also include new issues relating to food, or nightmares or night terrors.
- h If you are ready for your toddler to put themselves to sleep, you can gently remove yourself from the 'putting to sleep' with sensitivity and patience.

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i Leach, Penelope (2010). Penelope Leach: 'Face it: babies change your life'. The Independent. May 6. <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/penelope-leach-lsquo-face-it-babies-change-your-lifersquo-1964429.html>. Accessed 12/11/2013.

ii Iglowstein, I., Jenni, O.G., et al (2003) Sleep Duration From Infancy to Adolescence: Reference Values and Generational Trends. *Pediatrics*. 111 (2). 302-307.

iii Mindell, J.A., Sadeh, A. et al. (2010). Cross cultural differences in infant and toddler sleep. *Sleep Medicine* 9(11). 274-280.

iv Bonyata, K (2011). Breastfeeding past infancy: Fact Sheet (overview of the evidence). <http://kellymom.com/ages/older-infant/ebf-benefits/>. Visited 20/11/2013.

v (Freedom to learn, Why Young Children Protest Bedtime: Evolutionary Mismatch).