A better start for babies

Sensory | Motor | Attention / Regulation | Relationships | Together

Ei SMART - promoting and enhancing your child's development

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SLEEPY BABIES, BUSY BRAINS!

Understanding your baby's sleep and helping them settle



Sleep is a busy time for your baby. Sleep supports your baby to grow and recover. It also allows their developing brains to form connections and process their daytime experiences. Your familiar voice and closeness are comforting, both when your baby is awake and even while they are sleeping.

In the first year, your baby's sleep patterns change often. Every baby is different in how much they sleep, how much help they need to settle, and how often they wake. There is no single "normal" baby sleep routine. Getting to know your own baby's sleep needs and cues can guide you in supporting their sleep.

Babies have different kinds of sleep

ACTIVE SLEEP

During active sleep, you might notice eye movements (REM), wriggling, facial movements, sucking, little noises and some irregular breathing. Your baby might seem awake when they are not. This sleep is important for brain building.

QUIET SLEEP

During quiet sleep, your baby will be generally still, with fewer movements and steadier breathing. They might be less easily disturbed. This restorative sleep is important for growth, recovery, and supporting overall health.

Babies often move, make noises or little cries as they fall asleep or move between active and quiet sleep. This doesn't always mean that they want to be picked up. To protect their sleep, watch for a moment to see if they settle. Always respond if your baby seems distressed or unwell

What is normal sleep?

- Newborn babies sleep for much of the day, in short stretches. Frequent waking to feed and for comfort is expected. Over time, babies gradually spend more time asleep at night, although sleep continues to vary considerably.
- If your baby was born early, developmental and sleep patterns might take longer to become more regular and predictable. Their sleep patterns might be better understood using their corrected age. Follow your neonatal team's feeding and waking advice.
- Holding, feeding, rocking, stroking or singing may all help your baby settle. You do not need to teach a newborn to settle alone.

Safer sleep: every sleep, day and night

- Always place your baby on their back, in their own clear cot or Moses basket with a firm, flat, waterproof mattress.
- Avoid pillows, nests, bumpers, toys and loose bedding; avoid overheating or exposing your baby to smoke.
- Keep your baby in the same room as you for at least the first six months, including naps.
- The safest place for your baby to sleep is in their own separate sleep space. However, many parents choose to, or might find themselves, sharing a bed with their baby. It is important for all new parents to learn how to make bedsharing safer. Find guidance at https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/baby-safety/safer-sleep-information/co-sleeping/
- Never sleep with your baby on a sofa or armchair. There is a higher risk involved in sharing a bed if your baby was premature or had a low birthweight.

For full, current safer-sleep advice, visit www.lullabytrust.org.uk. This leaflet offers general guidance. Follow individual advice from your neonatal or community health team when relevant.

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HELPING YOUR BABY SLEEP

Look for your baby's sleepy signs



Yawning, looking away, becoming quiet, rubbing their eyes, or becoming fussy can be signs that your baby is overwhelmed and needs a break. Try settling before they become overtired.

There is no one approach that works for every baby. Notice what helps your baby and adapt as they grow.

The Ei SMART approach

S: Sensory

Keep the environment calm. Time outside in daylight during the day and keeping lights low at night can help establish day-night rhythms. Taking walks outside using a stroller or carrier can help with daytime naps as well as support your baby's and your own wellbeing. Reduce unnecessary sounds to support sleep; however, some babies are soothed by familiar household sounds such as conversations in the next room, the dishwasher or even the vacuum. If using white noise, keep the volume low and away from the cot.

M: Motor

Gentle rocking, swaying or patting may soothe your baby. Closeness to you while being carried can also help your baby settle and support them to fall asleep.

Always put your baby on their back in a clear cot for sleep. Stop swaddling at the first signs of rolling.

Some babies will practice new skills such as rolling at night – any sleep disturbance will pass once they master their new moves!

A: Attention & regulation

A gentle, predictable routine, perhaps a feed, cuddle, song or book, can let your baby know that it is time to sleep. When feeding, changing and settling your baby back to sleep at night, keep lights, sounds, movements and interactions as gentle and calming as possible.

R: Relationships

Your face, voice and touch help your baby feel safe. If your baby needs to be settled back to sleep, begin with soft talking, shushing or placing your hand on their body; then pick them up and comfort them if needed.

T: Together

For parents, frequent sleep disturbances can be both physically and mentally exhausting as this parent describes: "*"The long nights after NICU were exhausting, and there were times I wondered whether I was doing something wrong. Over time, I learned that my baby's sleep was not a measure of my parenting. By noticing their cues, responding with comfort and connection, and trusting what felt right for us, I grew in confidence. There was no perfect routine but there was a relationship growing stronger night by night. In the end we got there, we found our way together.*" Share care when possible, accept practical support, and take time to rest. If crying becomes overwhelming, put baby safely in their cot and step away briefly. Taking care of yourself is also part of caring for your baby.

When to get help

If you are finding it difficult to cope with your baby's night-waking or crying, advice and support is also available from organisations such as ICON (iconcope.org) or Cry-sis (cry-sis.org.uk) Helpline: 0800 448 0737 (UK).
Seek urgent help (999) if your baby is blue, floppy, struggling to breathe or very difficult to wake.
Speak to your GP, health visitor or neonatal team if your baby is unusually sleepy, not waking for feeds, has concerning breathing, or if you need help to cope.

More information: lullabytrust.org.uk | basisonline.org.uk | iconcope.org | cry-sis.org.uk

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