PRIMARY PEDIATRICS BLOG

How Much Sleep Does Your Child Really Need?

A Parent's Guide to Healthy Sleep from Newborn to Teen

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Meta Description: Wondering how much sleep your child really needs? Primary Pediatrics breaks it down by age, from newborns to teens with tips, FAQs, and expert guidance.

Every parent has been there. It's 9:30pm and your toddler is doing laps around the living room while you're running on fumes. Or maybe your teenager is sleeping until noon and you're not sure if that's laziness or a legitimate need. Sleep is one of the most common topics we hear about from parents at Primary Pediatrics, and for good reason. Getting the right amount of sleep is one of the single most important things a child can do for their health, mood, focus, and growth.

But the tricky part is that the answer is different at every stage. What a newborn needs looks nothing like what a kindergartner needs, and a teenager's sleep is a whole different conversation. This guide walks you through all of it - what to expect, what good sleep looks like, and what to do when things go sideways.

In this guide, you will learn:

- Exactly how many hours of sleep children need at every age - from newborns to teenagers
- What healthy sleep actually looks like for each developmental stage
- The most common sleep challenges parents face and how to handle them
- Practical, pediatrician-approved tips for building better sleep habits
- When to reach out to your child's doctor about sleep concerns
- Answers to the most frequently asked questions about kids and sleep

Why Sleep Is So Critical for Growing Children

Sleep is not downtime. When your child is asleep, their brain is actively processing everything they learned that day, consolidating memories, and making connections that support language, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. Their body is releasing growth hormone, repairing tissue, and building up the immune system.

The research is clear: children who consistently get enough sleep perform better in school, have fewer behavioral challenges, maintain healthier weights, get sick less often, and are better equipped to handle stress. Sleep deprivation in kids does not look like it does in adults. Rather than becoming sluggish and quiet, overtired children often become hyperactive, impulsive, and emotionally volatile -- which is frequently mistaken for a behavior problem when the real issue is simply not enough rest.

What Happens During Sleep

- Growth hormone is released -- most of it happens during deep sleep
- The brain consolidates memories and processes new information from the day
- The immune system strengthens and repairs
- Emotional regulation centers in the brain reset and recharge
- Physical growth and muscle repair takes place

Sleep by Age: What to Expect at Every Stage

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) provides sleep recommendations by age group. Here is what the research says, along with practical guidance from our team on what healthy sleep actually looks like for your child.

Newborns (0 to 3 Months)

Newborns | 0 to 3 Months — **Recommended:** 14 to 17 hours per day

- Sleep is fragmented into 2 to 4 hour stretches -- this is completely normal
- Newborns cannot yet distinguish between day and night
- They cycle through sleep stages quickly and wake frequently to feed
- Total sleep is spread across the full 24-hour day, not just nighttime
- REM sleep makes up a larger portion of newborn sleep than in older children -- this is essential for brain development

Pediatrician Tip: *Do not stress about a sleep schedule in the first 6 to 8 weeks. Your newborn's sleep is driven by hunger and biology, not habit. Focus on safe sleep (firm flat surface, on their back, no loose bedding) and rest whenever you can.*

Infants (4 to 11 Months)

Infants | 4 to 11 Months — **Recommended:** 12 to 15 hours (including naps)

- Most infants this age take 2 to 3 naps per day
- Nighttime sleep begins to consolidate. Many babies can sleep 6 to 8 hour stretches by 6 months
- Sleep associations form during this stage (being rocked, fed, or held to sleep)
- The 4-month sleep regression is very common and related to normal brain development
- Bedtime routines become increasingly effective and important at this stage

Pediatrician Tip: *If your baby still wakes multiple times per night after 6 months, it is worth discussing sleep training options with us. There is no single right approach. We can help you find one that fits your family.*

Toddlers (1 to 2 Years)

Toddlers | 1 to 2 Years	**Recommended:** 11 to 14 hours (including 1 nap)

- Most toddlers transition from 2 naps to 1 nap sometime between 12 and 18 months
- Bedtime resistance and stalling become very common at this age
- Separation anxiety can peak and disrupt sleep, even in good sleepers
- Consistent bedtime routines are highly effective - same time, same steps, every night
- Night terrors and nighttime waking are common and usually not a cause for concern

Pediatrician Tip: *Keep the bedtime routine short (20 to 30 minutes) and predictable. Bath, book, song, bed works well for many families. The routine itself signals to the brain that sleep is coming. Do not underestimate its power.*

Preschoolers (3 to 5 Years)

Preschoolers | 3 to 5 Years	**Recommended:** 10 to 13 hours

- Most children drop their nap somewhere between ages 3 and 5
- Even after naps are dropped, quiet rest time is still beneficial
- Nighttime fears and monsters under the bed become very common at this stage
- Imagination is booming -- this can make it harder for children to wind down
- Sleepwalking and sleep talking may begin and are usually harmless

Pediatrician Tip: *A nightlight and a comfort object (stuffed animal, blanket) can go a long way toward easing bedtime anxiety. If your child is stalling for 30 or more minutes every night, let us know. We can help rule out anxiety or other contributing factors.*

School-Age Children (6 to 12 Years)

School-Age | 6 to 12 Years	**Recommended:** 9 to 12 hours

- This age group is highly vulnerable to sleep deprivation from overscheduling and screen time
- Most school-age kids do not get enough sleep during the school year
- Sleep problems at this age can look like ADHD - inattention, impulsivity, difficulty focusing
- Electronic devices in the bedroom are one of the biggest disruptors of sleep at this stage
- Homework and after-school activities can push bedtimes dangerously late

Pediatrician Tip: *Screens out of the bedroom is one of the best things you can do for your school-age child's sleep. The blue light from devices suppresses melatonin production and keeps the brain alert when it should be winding down. Charge devices outside the room overnight.*

Tweens and Teenagers (13 to 18 Years)

Tweens and Teens | 13 to 18 Years — **Recommended:** 8 to 10 hours

- Puberty causes a biological shift in the sleep-wake cycle. Teens are not being lazy, their circadian rhythm genuinely shifts later
- Most teenagers are chronically sleep deprived. Many function on 6 hours or less
- Sleep deprivation in teens is linked to depression, anxiety, poor academic performance, and increased risk-taking
- Teens who get enough sleep report better mood, focus, and athletic performance

Pediatrician Tip: *If your teenager is struggling with sleep, it is worth a conversation at their annual well visit. We can help assess whether there is a sleep disorder, anxiety, or simply a schedule issue at play. Never dismiss teen sleep complaints. They are rarely just an excuse to stay up late.*

Summer and Sleep: What Changes When School Is Out

Summer is one of the most common times sleep routines fall apart, and for good reason. Schedules loosen up, bedtimes creep later, and everyone stays up to catch fireflies or watch a movie. A little flexibility is completely fine and part of what makes summer fun.

The challenge comes when the schedule drifts so far that children are sleeping until mid-morning and staying up past midnight. When that happens, the circadian rhythm, the internal body clock that regulates sleep and wakefulness, can shift significantly. Getting back on track before the school year starts can take one to two weeks and is much harder the further the schedule has drifted.

Summer Sleep Tips for Every Age

- Allow bedtime to shift no more than 30 to 60 minutes later than the school-year schedule
- Keep wake times relatively consistent. Sleeping in occasionally is fine, daily is not
- Protect nap schedules for babies and toddlers even with summer activities
- Limit screen time in the hour before bed. This applies in summer too
- Start shifting back toward school-year bedtimes two weeks before school starts
- Use natural light to help regulate the body clock. Get outside in the morning

Common Sleep Challenges and What to Do

My Child Will Not Fall Asleep Without Me

This is one of the most common sleep challenges we hear from parents of toddlers and preschoolers. It usually develops when children form a sleep association. They learn to fall asleep in a specific condition (a parent in the room, being held, nursing) and then need that same condition to fall back asleep during normal nighttime wakings. The solution involves gradually shifting how your child falls asleep at the start of the night, which usually resolves the middle-of-the-night wakings as well. This takes consistency and a few tough nights, but it works.

My Child Wakes Up Multiple Times at Night

Frequent nighttime waking is normal in the first year of life. Beyond that, it is worth asking why it is happening. Common culprits include sleep associations (see above), sleep apnea, restless legs, anxiety, or a schedule that is off, either the child is going to bed too late and is overtired, or the nap schedule is interfering with nighttime sleep. If your child is waking more than once or twice per night consistently after 12 months, bring it up at your next visit.

My Child Wakes Up Terrified in the Middle of the Night

If your child screams, thrashes, or appears terrified but cannot be consoled and does not remember anything in the morning, they are likely experiencing night terrors. These are different from nightmares and happen during deep (non-REM) sleep, usually in the first few hours of the night. They look frightening but are not dangerous and are very common between ages 3 and 8. The best approach is to stay calm, ensure your child is safe, and do not try to wake them. They will usually settle on their own within 10 to 20 minutes.

My Teenager Cannot Fall Asleep Until 1am

This is not necessarily a discipline problem. It may be a circadian rhythm issue called Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome, which is especially common in adolescents. Their internal clock has genuinely shifted later due to puberty, making it biologically difficult to fall asleep early. Bright light therapy in the morning, strict screen curfews, and gradual schedule shifting can help. If the problem is severe or causing significant distress, talk to us. There are effective treatment options.

When to Call Your Pediatrician About Sleep

- Your child snores loudly, pauses breathing, or gasps during sleep. These can be signs of sleep apnea
- Your baby under 3 months is sleeping significantly more or less than the recommended range
- Your child's sleep problems are affecting daytime mood, behavior, or school performance
- You are concerned your child may have anxiety, depression, or another condition affecting sleep
- Your child complains of uncomfortable sensations in their legs at night (possible restless legs syndrome)
- Night terrors are happening multiple times per week or are increasing in frequency
- You have tried consistent sleep routines for several weeks with no improvement

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: My baby slept through the night at 8 weeks and now wakes up constantly at 4 months. Did I do something wrong?

Absolutely not, and you are not alone. The 4-month sleep regression is one of the most common and surprising sleep disruptions parents face. It happens because your baby's brain is maturing and their sleep cycles are permanently changing to become more like adult sleep cycles. This is a developmental milestone, not a setback. It typically lasts 2 to 6 weeks. Staying consistent with bedtime routines and giving your baby opportunities to practice falling asleep independently can help you get through it.

Q: Is it okay to let my baby cry it out?

Sleep training is a personal decision, and there are multiple approaches that research has shown to be safe and effective. The 'cry it out' or extinction method is one of them. Decades of research have found no evidence that sleep training methods cause emotional harm to babies. That said, there is no single right approach. Some families prefer more gradual methods. We are happy to walk through the options with you and find a fit for your family. The most important thing is consistency, whichever method you choose.

Q: My 3-year-old dropped their nap but is a complete disaster by 4pm. What should I do?

The transition away from napping is one of the trickiest periods for families. Many children who drop the nap still benefit from a quiet rest period of 30 to 60 minutes in the early afternoon, even if they do not sleep. If your child is melting down in the late afternoon, you might also try moving bedtime earlier temporarily. Overtired children often have more trouble settling at night, so an earlier bedtime can actually improve everyone's evening.

Q: How much screen time before bed is too much?

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends turning off screens at least one hour before bed for children of all ages. The blue light emitted by phones, tablets, and televisions suppresses melatonin production, which is the hormone that signals to the brain that it is time to sleep. Even 30 minutes of screen-free wind-down time makes a measurable difference. Charging devices outside the bedroom overnight removes the temptation entirely and is one of the single most effective sleep hygiene changes a family can make.

Q: My child says they are not tired at bedtime. Should I force them to go to bed anyway?

Yes, with some nuance. Children are rarely accurate judges of their own tiredness. An overtired child often gets a second wind right around bedtime due to a cortisol surge, making them appear energetic when they actually need sleep. Stick to a consistent bedtime based on your child's age-appropriate sleep needs, not on whether they declare themselves tired. Over time, a consistent schedule regulates the body clock so that your child naturally begins to feel sleepy around the same time each night.

Q: My teenager sleeps 10 hours on weekends but only 6 during the week. Is that okay?

Sleeping in on weekends is often a sign that your teen is not getting enough sleep during the week and is trying to catch up. This pattern, sometimes called social jet lag, can actually make weekday mornings harder by further shifting the body clock. While some weekend flexibility is unavoidable, try to keep weekend wake times within an hour or two of the weekday schedule. The most effective solution is to protect more sleep time on school nights, even if that means reducing extracurricular commitments.

Q: When should I be worried that my child's sleep problem is something more serious?

Trust your instincts. If your child's sleep issues are affecting their daytime functioning - behavior, mood, attention at school, physical health, it is always worth bringing up with us. Specific red flags include loud snoring or observed pauses in breathing (which can indicate sleep apnea), complaints of uncomfortable leg sensations at night, extreme difficulty falling asleep regardless of timing, or sleep disruptions that began alongside changes in mood or behavior. We are always here to help you figure out what is going on.

Have questions about your child's sleep?

Our team at Primary Pediatrics is here to help. Whether you are navigating a newborn's unpredictable schedule or trying to help a teenager get enough rest before school, we are your partners every step of the way.

Call us or book a visit online today!

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This blog is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Always consult your child's pediatrician with specific health concerns.