

## Who Should Use This Guide?

Nightwakings in young children is one of the most common problems parents face. By 6 months of age, most babies are physiologically capable of sleeping throughout the night and no longer require nighttime feedings. However, 25%-50% continue to awaken during the night. The most important thing for parents to understand is that all children dream during the night and have brief periods of lighter sleep throughout the night; however, a child who has not learned how to fall asleep on their own at bedtime may struggle to fall back asleep without the help of their parents.

Many parents develop the habit of helping their child to fall asleep by rocking, holding, or bringing the child into bed with them. Over time, children may learn to rely on this kind of help from their parents in order to fall asleep. Although this may not be a problem at bedtime, it may lead to difficulties with your child falling back to sleep on her own during the night. Thus, sleep associations are conditions that the child learns to need in order to fall asleep at bedtime (such as rocking, nursing, or lying next to a parent). These same sleep associations are then needed in order to fall back to sleep during the night. The bottom line is that your child needs to learn to fall asleep on her own so that she can put herself immediately back to sleep when she awakens.

## Tips for Parents

- **Develop an appropriate sleep schedule with an early bedtime.** Ironically, the more tired your child is, the more times she will awaken during the night. So be sure to have your child continue to take naps during the day and set an early bedtime.
- **Security object.** Try to introduce your child to a transitional/love object. A transitional object, like a stuffed toy, doll or blanket, helps a child feel safe and secure when you are not present. Help your child become attached to a transitional object by including it as part of the bedtime routine. Try to include this object, and realize that some children will not accept one no matter how cute and cuddly the object may be.
- **Bedtime routine.** Keep bedtime routines consistent and streamlined so that the bed and bedroom become a strong single that it is used for sleep and sleep only. Rather than having engaging and fun interactions right at bedtime, families are encouraged to make bedtime quiet and boring in order to promote sleep onset.
- **Consistent bedroom environment.** Make sure your child’s bedroom environment is the same at bedtime as it is throughout the night (e.g. lighting).
- **Put your child to bed drowsy but awake.** After the bedtime routine, put your child in her crib/bed drowsy but awake and leave the room. Remember, the key to having your child sleep through the night is to have her learn to fall asleep on her own, so she can put herself back to sleep when she naturally awakens during the night.
- **Checking method.** If your child cries excessively or yells, check on them. These visits ought to be brief (<1 minute) and boring. Calmly tell your child it’s time to go to sleep. The purpose of returning to the room is to reassure your child that you are still present and to reassure you that your child is okay. Should your child be distressed when they are expected to fall asleep on their own, parents are encouraged to reassure the child that they will return in 5 minutes and actually come back and check on them in 5 minutes to help the child feel more at ease. Parents should consider increasing the time to 10 minutes in subsequent check-ins.

- **Respond to your child during the night.** In the beginning, respond to your child as you normally do throughout the night (e.g., nurse, rock). Research indicates that the majority of children will naturally begin sleeping through the night within 1-2 weeks of falling asleep quickly and easily at bedtime. If your child continues to awaken during the night after several weeks, then use the same checking method during the night as you did at bedtime.
- **A more gradual approach.** Some parents feel that not being present when their baby falls asleep feels like too big of a first step for them and their baby. A more gradual approach is to teach your baby to fall asleep on her own but with you in the room. This approach will take longer but feels more comfortable to some families. The first step is to put your child in her crib/bed awake and sit on a chair next to the crib/bed. Once she is able to consistently fall asleep this way, sit farther and farther away every three to four nights until you are finally in the hallway and no longer in sight.
- **Be consistent and don't give up.** The first few nights are likely to be very challenging and often the second or third night is worse than the first night. However, within a few nights to a week, you will begin to see improvement.

Adapted from: Mindell JA & Owens JA (2003). *A Clinical Guide to Pediatric Sleep: Diagnosis and Management of Sleep Problems*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

## Books & Web Sites

***What To Do When You Dread your Bed*** by Dawn Huebener, Ph.D.

***The Sleep Fairy*** by Janie and Macy Peterson

***Taking Charge of your Child's Sleep: All in one Resource for Solving Sleep Problems in Kids and Teens*** by Judith Owens, M.D. and Jodi A. Mindell, Ph.D.

## Local Resources

**Daily Behavioral Health**, 14538 Grapeland Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44111, 216-252-1399,  
[www.dailybh.com](http://www.dailybh.com) Offices in West Cleveland and Avon

## This Guide Provided By:

