

Off to sleep

A regular sleeping pattern is important for learning and growth, but how do you balance the timetables of parents and children when it comes to naps? *Kay Mathieson* offers some advice

Q Some of our children seem to have really late bedtimes and arrive tired and listless in the mornings. Also, parents often ask us to keep their child awake and not let them have a nap during the day so that they will sleep at night. How do we juggle parents' and children's needs in the advice we give about sleep and bedtimes?

A Our understanding of sleep has developed significantly as neuroscientific research has progressed. Whereas sleep used to be thought of purely as a restful time, we now recognise it is actually a very active time for the brain.

While we sleep, hormones are released to support muscle development and growth in our bodies. In our brains, memories and learning are processed, supporting myelination – the building of fast connections between neurons. Regular and healthy sleep patterns help these processes to happen naturally and are especially important in early development when the most rapid brain development takes place (Oates, 2012).

Each child is unique, so will need different amounts of sleep to enable their well-being and development. Total sleep in a day for a three-month-old might vary from eight hours to 18 hours. However, it is important to help babies and young children develop healthy sleep patterns.

The feeding, sleeping, activity pattern that a baby is encouraged to develop can have as much impact on parental well-being as the baby. Lack of sleep can reduce our decision-making, tolerance levels and regulation of our emotions. So when parents talk to practitioners about their concerns related to their child's sleep, they may themselves be trying to manage with less sleep than usual.

Families have very different views about bedtimes and it is important



Most parents prefer children to have the majority of their sleep at night, but naps may be needed

to recognise that there is a lot of variation in what works in different situations. However, there are some common elements that will help children to gain the maximum benefits of sleep most of the time.

Firstly, a predictable pattern of preparing for sleep will help. This should include a calming, soothing period before bedtime. Adults can thoughtfully develop a routine based on knowledge of their child and what helps them be calm and relax. This will vary from family to family, but the important elements are the adult setting the calm tone of preparation for bed and the child feeling safe and relaxed.

SLEEP PATTERNS

Unfortunately, even if a child usually has a regular pattern of going to bed and sleeping well, things can still go wrong, though this is more likely to be temporary. As a parent, it can be hard to believe things will return to the preferred routine, especially if you are missing sleep yourself. When



MORE INFORMATION

- *I Am Two! Working effectively with two-year-olds and their families* by K Mathieson (2013), The British Association for Early Childhood Education
- *Early Childhood in Focus 7: developing brains* edited by J Oates, A Karmiloff-Smith, MH Johnson (2012), The Open University Press, available from www.bernardvanleer.org

parents ask about or share concerns about their child's sleep, the first step is to talk together about how things go on 'a good night'. This will give you insights about the routine that the child is used to and what has worked for them.

Changes in sleep patterns can result from a range of things, including changes in bedding, lighting, decoration and holidays, as well as being unwell, excited, anxious, hungry, thirsty or losing comforters. Natural growth patterns not only affect appetite but also sleep patterns, which may be the first outward sign of changes.

Teething is the most obvious disruption, but other developments such as awareness of the sensations relating to toileting can also disturb established sleep patterns. Overtiredness, particularly when children are very active in their daily lives, can be a major factor in making bedtime routines difficult and maintaining amounts of sleep.

An in-depth discussion with parents gives you the opportunity to talk

through your shared understanding of the child's perspective at this particular time.

- How much sleep is the child generally getting through the day?
- What changes have you both noticed?
- From the range of possibilities, what is most likely to be affecting sleep at the moment?

Mostly parents would prefer children to have the majority of their sleep at night, so working towards this is a reasonable aim. However, many children continue to need a nap either morning or afternoon to help them cope with the day. Reviewing with parents how the child's day looks in terms of balance between levels of activity and sleep can highlight natural changes in energy, growth and tiredness.

Bedtimes will have a significant impact on the amount of sleep and ability to cope through the day. Most young children need about 12 hours sleep to enable them to be at their best through the day. So if they need to be getting up at 7am in the morning, they need to be asleep at by 7pm the night before.

After a period of disrupted routine, perhaps through teething or nightmares, it can take a while to get back to regular bedtimes. Perseverance and realistic expectations are essential to help children to do this. Here are some key points that may help:

- All adults at home need to be involved and agree on the approach.
- Changes in bedtimes are gradual. If currently 9pm, bring this forward by ten to 20 minutes at a time rather than going straight back to 7pm.
- Routines for preparing to sleep are focused on relaxation and 'unwinding'.
- Children are put in their bed or cot when drowsy, not once asleep.

As children gradually need less of a daily nap, the transition can be a struggle, with children sometimes doing without a nap for several days then having a 'long' nap that then affects night-time sleep. This can be frustrating for parents, but can be helped if you talk – as soon as you both feel there are times when the child does not need a nap – about how you will work together to help the child gradually adjust their routine. ■

Kay Mathieson is an early years consultant and author

WORKING WITH PARENTS

Young Dads' Council

Nurseries supporting young fathers should look to the Young Dads' Council

Over the past four years, the Young Dads' Council and Young Dads TV have established themselves as a major source of information and support for fathers under 25 and the professionals who support them.

They are run by Media for Development, a not-for-profit company dedicated to empowering isolated communities through the media. According to the council, fathers under the age of 25 are disproportionately drawn from the poorest communities in the UK, with feelings of isolation compounded by gender bias and a sense of social invisibility.

Scott Colfer, manager of Young Dads TV, says, 'Young fathers often feel isolated from parent support services. Young Dads TV listened to what they had to say and amplified their messages, helping to make services more young-father-friendly. Today, members of the Young Dads' Council are continuing that work and creating more young-father-friendly spaces throughout London.'

ADDRESSING NEEDS

Under its initial funding – a three-year grant from The Monument Trust – Young Dads TV carried out research into the needs of young fathers and established a steering group called the Council of Young Dads to develop initiatives to address these needs.

One such initiative was *Me and My Dad*, an online soap opera to make young fathers aware of their children's needs and to offer reassurance to them that other young dads experience similar problems.

Another was Dads' Map, local listings of places for dads to take their children and parent support groups. Lack of information was identified as a major problem for young fathers, who are generally unaware of the statutory support available to them and have never heard of Sure Start. Of the 1,500 young fathers in one local authority in 2010-11, only 171 had accessed a children's centre.

ADVOCACY

The council also sought to address the other major need identified for young fathers – advocacy – as many feel that they have no

influence over political decisions that affect their lives.

As well as influencing Government recommendations for statutory services on the needs of young fathers, individual members also represented the views of young dads in the national media and have worked with the Mayor's office in London.

The work of the council is now being developed under a Trust for London grant, awarded last September. As a peer advisory service dedicated to reducing the levels of poverty and isolation experienced by young fathers in London, the council will provide statutory services with advice, guidance and tips on how to better engage with fathers. Its 20 members will be paid the London living wage for their time and their travel and childcare costs will be reimbursed.

INDEPENDENT VALUATION

The council hopes to build on the success of Young Dads TV. An independent evaluation by the University of Wolverhampton found that the initiative has helped to:

- develop young dads' identities as fathers
- make young dads aware of their rights
- increase group support networks and resilience in the face of problems
- build self-esteem and confidence
- form new relationships and friendships
- develop wider social networks
- increase young dads' voices at a local level.

Young Dads TV was also awarded a distinction from the United Nations for helping to support the Millennium Development Goals, and won a Nominet Internet Award for empowering citizens.

MORE INFORMATION

- *Young Dads' Council*, www.youngdadsCouncil.co.uk
- *Young Dads TV*, www.youngdads.tv
- See *YouTube* for episodes of the show *My Dad and Me*

