Government of **Western Australia**
Child and Adolescent Health Service

Tips for healthy sleep

Babies 6-12 months

Perth Children's Hospital and
Neonatology King Edward Memorial Hospital

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Key messages

Sleep is important for **wellbeing, growth and development**.

The first year of a child's life is **often exhausting** for parents and caregivers.

As babies get older, they need less sleep overall. More of their sleep happens at night.

Developments like **crawling and separation anxiety can affect sleep** and settling for babies over 6 months.

Most sleep **issues in babies are behavioural**.

Some sleep issues may be caused by a health issue.

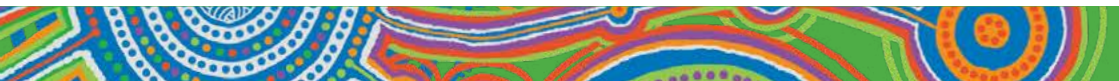
This Guide provides **practical strategies** for parents and caregivers to try to help their baby sleep better.

Who is this guide is for?

This Guide is for families who would like evidence based and **practical strategies** to help support their child to build lifelong healthy sleep habits. The purpose is to help your **child to become self-regulated and independent** in sleep. This has been shown to reduce parental/caregiver stress and improve mental health of carers particularly mothers.

The Guide also contains information **specific to babies born pre-term** who may have additional challenges.

Remember **most sleep problems in early childhood are behavioural**, however, some may be due to medical reasons which may need follow up.



Babies and sleep

Between 6 and 12 months, your baby is **growing fast, learning to sit, crawl**, and maybe even stand!

Sleep is essential for their brain development, growth, and overall wellbeing.

Every baby is different. Some are great sleepers; others need a little more help.

Your baby will need **12-16 hours of total sleep** including naps.

If you're finding your baby's sleep difficult, you are not alone. Sleep issues are very common in early childhood, and many families go through the same thing.

Every family is different and there are many approaches to help your baby to sleep better, even if your baby has other difficulties. Warmth and consistency are the key!

Although it might be a bumpy ride at times, the SLEEPSS* approach (outlined below), and other strategies to change sleep associations, **provide a good foundation for all babies' healthy sleeping**.

*SLEEPSS has been developed by Dr D. Goel, PCH Consultant in consultation with Sleep specialists, Neonatal specialists, community health and consumers feedback.

7 sleeping tips: SLEEPSS*

1. Set a bedtime routine

- A consistent, calming routine (e.g. bath, brush teeth/gums, book, cuddle, bed) to help your baby know it is time to wind down.

2. Lock in bedtime

- Set a regular bedtime, which suits your family. Aim for bedtime between 6.30pm-8.00pm.

3. Encourage self-settling

- Put your baby down drowsy but awake. This helps them learn to fall asleep independently.

4. Ensure safe sleep

- Always place baby on their back to sleep.
- Keep baby's face and head uncovered. Pillows are not safe for babies.
- Keep your baby's environment smoke-free, before and after birth.
- Create a safe sleeping environment, both night and day, such as their own safe space, safe mattress, safe bedding and their feet at the bottom of the bassinet or cot.
- Put your baby in a safe cot in the parents' or caregiver's room for the first 6-12 months and breastfeed your baby if possible.

5. Peaceful night time responses

- Babies may still wake at night. Respond calmly. Brief, quiet reassurance helps them settle without becoming fully awake.

6. Spot sleepy signs: avoid overtiredness

- Look for sleepy signs such as rubbing eyes, yawning, losing interest in play. Overtired babies can struggle to fall asleep.

7. Stay patient and consistent

- Sleep issues may take time to resolve. It's important to remain calm, consistent, and patient as your baby adjusts to healthy sleep habits.

If you are co-parenting, **share your bedtime routines and strategies** with the other parent or caregivers so your child has consistency.

For more detailed safe sleep guidelines, scan the QR code to refer to the visual guide provided by Red Nose Australia.

Feeding and sleep

By 6-12 months, some babies may no longer need night feeds but every baby is different. If unsure, check with your healthcare provider.

Sleep associations

A sleep **association is anything your baby learns to rely on to fall asleep** like rocking, feeding, patting, or being held. These are comforting in the short term but may lead to your baby needing help every time they go to sleep both during the day and night.

Waking at night is normal as babies cycle through light and deep sleep.

Common sleep associations

- feeding to sleep (breast or bottle)
- rocking, bouncing, or walking to sleep.
- being held or lying with a parent
- using a dummy or pacifier
- needing white noise, music, or movement

If you are worried about your baby's sleep associations, with a consistent effort they can be changed. However, **managing a sleep association can be challenging** and it is important to listen to your baby's cues, respond sensitively and be kind to yourself.

Changing sleep associations

Try the following to **help change sleep associations**:

Introduce a new, consistent bedtime routine

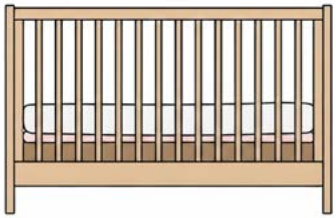
This helps signal sleep without relying on one specific cue. Try bath → quiet play → story → cuddle → into bed.

Put baby down drowsy but awake

This helps your baby learn to settle. Start with short periods and gradually reduce your involvement.

Use a "fade out" approach

Gradually reduce how much you help your baby fall asleep. For example, instead of rocking fully to sleep, rock until drowsy, then put baby down. Over days, reduce the rocking time.



Offer comfort in other ways

Try gentle shushing, patting, or placing a hand on your baby in the cot. Stay close at first, then gradually move further away.

Stay consistent

Babies learn through repetition. Change can take more than a few nights. Be patient and be kind to yourself and your baby.

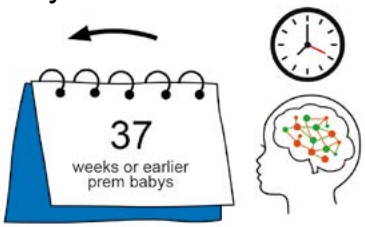
Babies born pre-term

If your child was born **pre-term (before 37 weeks)**, it is important to adjust their sleep expectations based on their corrected age (that is, actual age minus weeks early).

Sleep development may follow **a slightly different timeline**, and it can take longer for pre-term infants to consolidate nighttime sleep or develop self-settling skills.

Managing sleep associations can be especially important for pre-term infants, as they may **require more support** to develop self-soothing skills and adjust to a consistent sleep routine.

Pre-term infants might have a **more challenging time adjusting to sleep routines**, and they might form stronger dependencies on certain sleep associations, such as being rocked or fed to sleep. These habits can be harder to change over time, so **early intervention and gentle strategies** are recommended.



Managing sleep associations in pre-term babies

Allow time for development

Pre-term babies might take longer to adjust to sleep routines. **Be patient and consistent** with your approach, especially if they are still learning to self-soothe.

Gradual changes

If your baby is relying heavily on feeding, rocking, or being held to fall asleep, consider a **gradual reduction approach**. For example, if you usually rock them to sleep, try reducing the time you spend rocking, and eventually, place them in their crib while still drowsy but awake.

Managing sleep associations in pre-term babies

Consistent routine

Establishing a **consistent bedtime routine** is essential. Even though they may need extra help to settle, sticking to the same steps each night (e.g. bath, song, cuddle) can give your pre-term infant a sense of security and comfort.

Use a “camping out” method

This is a gradual process where **you stay close by** while your baby learns the skills of settling to sleep. Over time, move further away from the crib to help them learn to self-settle without as much assistance.

Monitor for signs of over-tiredness

Pre-term babies may be **more sensitive to being overtired**, which can make it harder for them to settle down. Watch for tired cues and help them get to sleep before they become too overstimulated.

Safe sleep practices

Follow safe sleep guidelines for your baby, regardless of their prematurity, in accordance with the safe sleeping guide.

Red Nose Australia guides

Support and encouragement

It’s normal for pre-term infants to need extra support as they adjust to sleep routines. **Offer comfort but try not to create an over-reliance** on a specific sleep association. Be consistent and try to remain calm and patient, sleep issues may take time to resolve.

Prepare for setbacks

- Over time, most babies **will learn to fall asleep and stay asleep**.
- Some things may work for a time and then they stop working.
- **Setbacks can happen** for several reasons including illness, short term changes in routine, changes at home and developmental shifts.
- Remember, at times of illness your baby may need a slightly different approach. You may find that when **you resume your routine** after an illness it may feel **challenging for a while**.
- Things will get better over time. Be gentle on yourself.

Signs of a medical sleep issue

Most sleep difficulties in babies are behavioural and improve with routine and support.

However, **some sleep problems may have a medical cause**, like Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA). This occurs when the airway becomes partially or completely blocked during sleep, causing pauses in breathing.

OSA is more common in pre-term infants due to their smaller airways and immature respiratory system, but it can occur in term babies as well.

Signs and symptoms of OSA

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) can present as:

- **loud snoring** most nights (not just occasional)
- **breathing pauses** during sleep
- **gasping**, choking, or struggling to breathe during sleep.
- restless sleep, **frequent tossing and turning**.
- **sweating** heavily during sleep
- waking up **tired**, **cranky**, or hard to settle
- **feeding difficulties** or poor growth
- **breathing through the mouth** or drooling a lot during the day or night.

Trust your instincts

If something feels wrong or your baby still has trouble sleeping even with good routines, talk to your doctor. Getting help early can make a big difference.

When to seek medical help

This can include:

- Your baby's sleep problems are very bad and affect growth, mood, or development.
- Loud snoring, gasping, or pauses in breathing during sleep.
- Very sleepy or tired during the day.
- Sleep problems impacting weight gain or difficulty feeding, this may indicate a more serious issue.

Referrals for medical review

If you have tried the SLEEPSS approach and other behavioural strategies, and you or your GP are concerned your baby may have a medical sleep issue, your GP can refer your baby to:

- Perth Children's Hospital Sleep Clinic through the Central Sleep Referral system to assess your baby's breathing and sleep in more detail.

Perth Children's Hospital ENT Clinic to assess airway problems as a cause of sleep issues or a private paediatric sleep physician or ENT surgeon.

Sleep resources

There are good resources on sleep available to support you and your family.

Ngala provides information and advice for parents and caregivers. Scan the QR code to visit the Ngala website.

Ngala provides a **Parenting Line** which is open 8am-8pm for advice on parenting challenges including sleep issues. Ngala can also provide **evidence informed sleep support** from a team of qualified professionals to help you with common sleep challenges. The number is **(08) 9368 9368**.

You might want to enrol in a **free intervention** hosted by Ngala that aims to strengthen your relationship with your child while helping your child to regulate behaviours and emotions. Scan the QR code for more information.

Other **helpful links** include:

Australian Government's Raising Children Network

Sleep resources from Royal College of General Practitioners

Australian Sleep Health Foundation

You are not alone

Remember, **every child is different**. Some are great sleepers; others need a little more help.

Parenting an unsettled baby and dealing with your own broken sleep is **tiring and stressful**. You are doing an amazing job.

What matters most is that **you and your child are supported and well**.

If you are **feeling overwhelmed** there are people to help you such as your community health nurse, your GP or Ngala. Contact family, friends and community supports for help.

Anxiety and depression are very common when parenting babies.

If you need to **talk to someone** about your concerns for your child and for yourself, contact **Ngala's Parenting Line on (08) 9368 9368** between 8am and 8pm.

You could also reach out to **Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636** or **online at www.beyondblue.org.au**

If you think you may shake or hurt your baby or hurt yourself – put baby in a safe place, like in a cot, and get help immediately by contacting **Crisis Care on 1800 199 008.**

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Consumer Approved

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