

# Regular Naps Improve Nighttime Sleep

By Elizabeth Pantley

According to sleep research, and motherly experience, the length and the quality of naps affect nighttime sleep. (And, conversely, nighttime sleep affects naps.)

Babies differ in their napping needs – but here’s a general guide that applies to most babies:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Naps</b>	<b>Hours of Naptime</b>
<b>4 mos.</b>	3	4-6
<b>6 mos.</b>	2	3-4
<b>9 mos.</b>	2	2 ½ - 4
<b>12 mos.</b>	1-2	2 - 3
<b>2 years</b>	1	1 - 2
<b>3 years</b>	1	1 - 1 ½

## When should your baby nap?

Timing of naps is important. A nap too late in the day will negatively affect nighttime sleep. Certain times of the day are better for napping because they suit your baby’s biological clock; these optimum periods balance sleep and wake time to affect nighttime sleep in the most positive way.

All babies are different, but generally, the best nap times are as follows:

- If baby takes three naps: midmorning/early afternoon/early evening
- If baby takes two naps: midmorning/early afternoon

- If baby takes one nap: early afternoon

### **Watch your baby's sleepy signals!**

Naps should happen *immediately* when your baby shows signs of tiredness. If you wait too long, she becomes *overtired*, "wired up," and unable to sleep.

Once you are familiar with the your baby's nap needs you can plan a nap routine to start the wind-down process. If consistent naps are new to you look more for your baby's signs of tiredness and scrimp on the routine until you settle into a predictable pattern. In other words, don't begin a lengthy pre-nap routine if your baby is clearly ready to sleep!

Watch for these signs of fatigue; your baby may demonstrate one or more of these:

- decreasing activity
- quieting down
- losing interest in people and toys
- rubbing eyes
- looking glazed
- fussing
- yawning
- laying down
- caressing a lovey or asking for a pacifier, bottle or to nurse

### **Timing is very, very important!**

You have probably experienced this scenario: Your baby looks tired and you think, "Time for a nap." So, you wash her hands and face, change her diaper, answer a phone call, put out the dog, and head for baby's crib or the family bed, only to find that she's suddenly wide awake and anxious to play!

What happened? She has moved through her window of tiredness and gotten that "second wind" that buys her another hour or two of alert time before she re-enters her tired state. This can often happen later in the day. Suddenly, your baby is (finally!) ready for a nap at dinnertime, and the plot thickens- do you put her for a late nap and thus extend bedtime, or keep her awake and deal with a tired, fussy baby? Rather than face this ordeal, respond earlier to her signs of fatigue and get her in for her nap right at that time.

Once you have watched your baby carefully for a week or so, you should be able to create a nap schedule that works with her daily periods of alertness and tiredness,

thus making your nap schedule easy to adhere to.

### **The Nap Routine**

Once you've established a nap schedule for your baby, it is very helpful if you create a simple but specific nap routine. This routine should be different from your nighttime routine, although it can have similarities that signal sleep- for example, the presence of a lovely or special sleep-inducing music. Follow your nap routine the same way every day. (Except, as I mentioned before, if your baby is showing clear signs of being tired and ready to sleep. Then abbreviate or even eliminate your routine for that day.)

For a reluctant napper, your routine might include some relaxing motion, such as rocking/relaxing in a swing/walking in a sling or stroller, and some gentle lullaby music.

A nap routine doesn't have to be long and involved to be effective. If your baby's nap occurs about the same time every day there will be many subtle cues, such as the timing of his lunch, that tell your baby that nap time is nearing.

Better naps mean better nighttime sleep.

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