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18 Month Old to Two and a Half Year Old Child and Sleep

An eighteen month old on average sleeps eleven and a quarter hours at night and two and a quarter hours during one midday or afternoon nap. At age two, sleep requirements drop to eleven hours at night and two during the day. Over the next year that will drop to ten and a half hours at night and one and a half during the day. Remember these are averages but variations should not be huge. Watch your child's daytime behavior for clues to whether he or she needs more sleep.

Toddlers and early preschoolers are a lot of fun, but bedtime can be a challenge. They are learning to follow simple directions, yet they also test our rules and their limits. Curious about their world, they are extremely eager to explore, leading to more limit testing and boundary breaking. They climb, crawl, crash, and clamber, standing on furniture, knocking down gates, trying to scramble out of the crib. Yet as they push their limits, they rely on their parents to keep setting boundaries, seeking safety, reassurance, and security.

Their language skills are blossoming, but they understand more than they can say, leading to frustration and tantrums. Their favorite words seem to be no, I do, and mine, and they are particularly possessive about their toys and their parents. As their language skills improve, they just love to stall, bargain, and negotiate, particularly around bedtime.

They may go through periods when they have the “scaries” of the dark, thunder, monsters, and the like. Nightmares and night terrors may start, and be a recurring problem for the next several years. Potty training can complicate bedtime behavior, if you let it become a battle of wills rather than a cooperative venture. To prevent bedtime from becoming a war zone, make sure that you have a very consistent, predictable, and soothing routine. Clear rules and parental consistency are essential, along with plenty of love, cuddles, and kisses.

Sample Schedule:

7:00 a.m.–7:30 a.m. Wake-up and breakfast.
12 p.m.–12:30 p.m. Lunch.
12:30 p.m. – 1:00 p.m. Start afternoon nap.
5:00 p.m.–5:30 p.m. Dinner.

6:00 p.m.–6:30 p.m. Start bath/bedtime routine.

7:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m. Bedtime.

Most kids this age will demand that you do everything in the same order each night, and not leave anything out, so limit the bedtime regimen to a manageable number of elements (one story plus one song plus one cuddle in the rocking chair). Starting around age 2, you may see a lot of stalling and delay tactics. If your child “needs frequent tucking in, another kiss, etc., respond once. The second time he calls for you, be neutral but firm and say, “No more tuck-ins. Now it’s time to go to sleep,” and stand your ground: If you say, “Last time” and then give in, you’re sending the message that if your tyke begs and cries long enough, he’ll get what he wants. If you and your partner take turns putting your child to bed, it’s perfectly fine if your styles are slightly different. Just make sure that you’re consistent about when bedtime takes place and how you respond to delay tactics.

As toddlers turn into preschoolers, they may be able to skip an occasional nap without falling apart. Don’t be fooled into thinking that she’s outgrown naps completely. Most kids need about an hour or an hour and a half until age 3.5 or four.

Changes and Challenges: Climbing out of the Crib

Many toddlers in this age group try climbing out of the crib. I almost always advise parents to keep him in as long as possible, definitely until 2½ years old and preferably until 3. By then, a child has the verbal skills to understand the “big bed” rules and to communicate when he has gotten out of bed for the twentieth time that night. To stop a tot from going overboard (and keep him from getting hurt if he does manage to scramble out), you can:

- Lower the mattress as low as it goes.
- Put pillows on the ground around the crib to cushion falls.
- Remove any large toys or stuffed animals from the crib that he may be able to step up on.
- When your child does get out, return him to the crib with minimal interaction and say, “No climbing.”
- Stay nearby at bedtime and peek through the door. If you see your child start to raise his leg say, “No climbing.”
- Get a mesh crib tent. Put a positive spin on it by decorating it.
- Dress your child in a “sleep sack”; he won’t be able to raise his leg over the crib rail.

If you are ready to transition your toddler to a crib or already have, ask for the handout “Transitioning from Crib to Bed”.