

I Need a Nap!

“I need a nap!”—recognize this tired parent?



OKAY, let's take a quick survey: how many of you have ever put your over-tired young child into the car, then driven on a bumpy road on a route known for its paucity of traffic lights, looking in the rearview mirror hoping to see a sleeping child?

How many of you have ever rocked your young child until you BOTH have fallen asleep in the chair?

How many of you have purposefully keep your child AWAKE in the car in order to get home before nap time, doing anything to keep her awake? Otherwise, you predict, if your child falls asleep on the five minute car ride home, she will wake up when you try to transfer her to the crib. If that occurs you will lose the nap for the rest of the day and she will be MISERABLE (and, hence, so will you).

How precious is nap time? All parents know the answer to this question: VERY VERY PRECIOUS! Parents spend the time during a baby or toddler's nap to pay bills, do laundry, prepare a meal, clean the house, spend time with an older sibling, and perhaps most importantly, TO TAKE A NAP OURSELVES.

Yet all children outgrow their need to nap sooner or later (at least, until they become parents themselves). The exact time this dreaded day comes can vary. The range is typically between two and five years of age. And children do not always give up their naps all at once. One day they do not nap, then they nap the rest of the week, then they don't nap for a few days, then they nap one day, and so forth. Sometimes they fall asleep only if they happen to be in the car. Eventually your child will sleep only overnight and not at all during the day.

Naps are very important for young children. Not only do naps foster better cheer, better learning, and better behavior, but also good naps actually help improve night time sleep. Any parent can attest that an overtired toddler has a WORSE night sleep than a toddler who goes into

bedtime well-rested. This is one of the great paradoxes of childhood. I like to explain to my patients: "Good sleep begets good sleep."

Just as you invest your time and effort in taking good care of baby teeth only to have them all fall out later, you should invest your time and effort in establishing good nap habits for your young child, even though your child eventually gives up her nap. Start by making sure she can fall asleep on her own during her NIGHT bedtime routine (see our podcast on this subject) . If she can fall asleep on her own at night, she will be more apt to fall asleep in the day. Darken the room and give her other signals associated with sleep such as her favorite stuffed animal or lullaby. Have a short "nap time routine" just as you have a night time routine. Save the serious sleep training for night time- you do not have the luxury of hours to train in the day. If she does not fall asleep within half an hour, get her up and struggle through the rest of the day, or try again later.

If she still will not nap after several days of trying, go ahead and do whatever it takes to have a happy kid by dinner. Take that car ride, rock her to sleep... understand that the "fix" is temporary. Either she will give up the "nap rebellion" or she will give up the nap entirely. Continue to put your non-napper in bed at night earlier to make up for her lack of daytime sleep. When your child is mostly cheerful, not throwing an unusual number of toddler tantrums, and is at least two years old, then likely she has truly outgrown her need to nap.

In the meantime, go grab some Zzzzzs. I know some of you only have time to read this post because your child is napping. So go follow suit!!

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