

Sleep Problems

1.) Definition: Sleep problems are very common in children. Often parents worry that sleep problems are a sign of something more serious, such as an ear infection. However, without other symptoms, such as runny nose or fever, problems sleeping may just be problems sleeping! The most common problem is night walking. Some children also experience nightmares, night terrors, sleep talking/walking. Night terrors are screaming/crying at night **without** being awake. If a child has night terrors they should not be awakened-they should be left alone.

2.) Treatment:

a.) Most sleep experts recommend that the first step towards good sleep for children (and their parents) is setting up helpful routines and developing good habits. As early as possible, it is helpful to try to put your child to sleep partially awake so that they learn how to put themselves to sleep. If your child is not already doing this, you can make a gradual transition to this by practicing at nap time or bedtime. The environment at bedtime or naptime should be restful, not too stimulating. If a child is used to falling asleep to music (or for older children, television), then if they wake up in the middle of the night they will need that stimulation to get to sleep again.

b.) The normal sleep cycle for all people includes periods of lighter sleep/wakefulness. Most veteran sleepers know how to get themselves back to sleep without fully waking. A child who does not know how to get to sleep on his/her own will wake and cry out for you. What can you do to reverse this? You can try variations on the "Ferber" method by letting your child cry or fuss for 1 minute then 2 then 3 etc. before you go to see them. When you go to your child at night, you should try to do the minimum necessary to get them back to sleep-i.e. feed the least, give water only, feed not at all, patting a back instead of picking up and rocking. For older children who get out of bed, walking them back to bed quietly without discussion can be helpful. Remember that repetition, persistence and consistency pay off.

c.) What is the age to expect your children to be able to sleep long stretches at night? Most children 4 months or older are capable of sleeping at least a 6 hour stretch at night. The older the child gets, the more likely he/she is capable of sleeping longer, but has just not learned the proper techniques. It is up to the parents to decide when they and their child are ready to work on getting the child to sleep longer at night. Just remember that like any habit, the longer you wait, the harder it may be to break the habit.

3.) Call our office during regular hours if:

- a.) You have any questions about your child's sleep.
- b.) Your child's sleep problems are new and accompanied by signs of illness.

4.) Call our office urgently if:

- a.) You feel your child is very ill.