Handling Specific Sleep Problems

Sometimes infants have specific sleep problems that make it harder for them to fall asleep or to get good, uninterrupted sleep.

Specific sleep problems include mixing up day and night, being unable to sleep through the night, waking up too early, nighttime separation anxiety, and trouble falling asleep because bedtime has become a battle.

General sleep problems usually can be handled using the strategies outlined in the guide Sleep Concerns (Birth–18 months). If your child has a specific problem, such as those mentioned above, other methods of helping your child will likely work better.

Tips for dealing with sleep problems
Here are tips to help you handle specific sleep problems.

When an infant mixes up day and night
If your baby is mixing up day and night, here are a few steps you can take.
- Limit daytime naps to three to four hours each.
- Wake babies who are sleeping too long. Do this by rubbing their feet, undressing them, burping them, or holding them upright.
- After waking them, stimulate them with a toy or by singing or talking.
- Don’t prevent daytime napping altogether. You don’t want an overtired baby.
- Have your baby sleep in a stroller during the day and, if possible, take the stroller outdoors. At night, have your infant sleep in a bassinet or crib.
- Don’t block out all light during a daytime nap.
- Darken the room at night. Don’t turn on the TV. Don’t overstimulate your baby if he or she wakes during the night.

When a 3- to 6-month-old doesn’t sleep through the night
- Make the last feeding of the night larger than usual.
- Before you go to sleep, wake and feed your baby.
- Make sure your baby is getting enough to eat during the day.
- Increase the time between nighttime feedings by 30 minutes each night until a feeding has been eliminated.
- Gradually reduce the amount you feed during the feeding you want to eliminate.
- Don’t change a diaper at night unless absolutely necessary.
- If your baby is sharing a room, move your baby to a room of his or her own.

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Birth–18 Months

**Naps**
If your baby is not sleeping enough, try longer naps during the day.
- Make sure your baby naps in a comfortable place, such as a crib or bassinet.
- Make sure the room is a comfortable temperature during a nap.
- Make sure you feed and change your baby’s diaper before a nap.
- Try lengthening the time between naps.

**Waking up too early**
Here are some ways to adjust your baby’s sleep schedule to an acceptable waking time.
- Put shades in windows to block out early morning sunlight.
- Close windows to muffle street noises.
- Put your baby to bed a little later at night.
- Delay the first morning nap by 10 minutes each day to adjust waking time.
- Don’t let your baby sleep too much during the day.
- Wait a few minutes before going to your baby in the morning.
- Put safe toys in the crib to occupy your baby in the morning.

**Nighttime separation anxiety**
Some babies have trouble being left alone at night.

Here are tips for easing nighttime separation anxiety:
- Make the time before bedtime as quiet and soothing as possible.
- Have a bedtime routine, and stick to it.
- Comfort and reassure without picking your baby up.

**When bedtime becomes a battle**
When toddlers approach age 18 months, they may start to fight bedtime. Try some of the strategies mentioned above. If fear seems to be an issue, these steps might help:
- Talk to your child about the need for sleep and how everyone sleeps at night.
- A slightly later bedtime might help.
- Use a timer that dings when bedtime is near.
- Allow toddlers who are not yet sleepy to play quietly in their room.
- Don’t stay with your children until they fall asleep.
- Wait a little bit before returning if your child fusses or cries.
- Let your child know how proud you are when bedtime goes smoothly.
- Stay calm during bedtime battles.

**A final word**
These tips should help solve or reduce most sleep problems. But remember:
- Trust your instincts.
- Be consistent.
- Stick to your plan. Don’t quit trying or give in.

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