

The ultimate
nap guide
for newborns to toddlers





"A baby is born with a need to be loved - and never outgrows it"
Frank A Clark

Attachment first.

Before we begin to focus on naps I want to focus on connection as I strongly believe connection comes before sleep. When I talk about connection, I mean the bond between yourself and your baby, but it also goes further than that by you becoming attuned to your baby and their needs.

Attunement is being aware of and responding to your baby's needs, for some this is instinctive, and they are quickly able to respond to their baby. For some it can be trickier to navigate especially in those early days and weeks as you get to know each other and tune in to what your baby is communicating with you.

Babies are born communicators; however, it is knowing how to understand the verbal sounds and non-verbal body language of your baby. When it comes to understanding when your baby is getting tired your baby will display some signs although the early signs are not that obvious, (I have put these sleep cues in the following page).

Often, we see the late signs of tiredness which can mean that your baby is overtired meaning it is difficult to settle them off to sleep. Attachment is the emotional bond to another person, the earliest bonds formed by children with their parents or caregivers have an important impact that continues throughout their life.

Attunement and attachment are intrinsically related in that, parents or caregivers that are available and attuned to their child establish a sense of security within the child. Being responsive to your child's needs creates loving and trusting relationships that enables a strong foundation for which the child can explore the world.





Sleep cues

Early signs of tiredness

Yawning
Fussing
Losing interest in their toys or people
Turning their face away
Looking pale
A glazed expression
Waving arms and legs
Going quiet

Late signs of tiredness

Grimacing
Back arching
Rubbing eyes
Pulling up their knees
Vigourous wriggling
Pulling on the ears
Crying or being inconsolable
seeking comfort, through feeding or not wanting to be put down
Rubbing face on parents shoulder or chest

The function of naps

When it comes to babies and sleep it can be naps that can cause so much confusion. It is true that babies will sleep a lot however sleep is often broken between the day and night- time. There are so many guides out there that will tell you how much sleep your baby should sleep for and how many naps they should be having by age.

However, sleep like with anything is very individual to each individual baby. Your baby is UNIQUE and I hope that this guide will offer some reassurance and help you nail the right naps for YOUR baby. I have included some timings in this guide (average naps by age are overleaf) however, I do urge you to use them cautiously and respect your babies own unique sleep needs.

From a practical view the reason for babies napping is to minimize the stress response caused by increased sleep pressure. When we become tired the stress hormone cortisol is released which can make sleep difficult. Naps therefore can keep the cortisol levels lowered and aid restful sleep.

The two most accepted theories of why we need sleep are: that it conserves energy by reducing our metabolic rate and serves as a period of restoration. Infants and young children's function of sleep is down to physical growth, consolidating new memories and more energy. For all age groups it can improve memory, give us a positive mood and promote cell growth and repair. For little ones, who are growing and developing rapidly sleep therefore serves its very important purpose on this.

Just like anything when it comes to development your baby's sleep will differ from other babies, some may like to cat nap frequently where as other babies may like infrequent longer naps. It is often these two styles that babies fall into which is natural for them, hard when we try to push the cat napper into the longer sleep style.



Average sleep requirements by age



	NUMBER OF NAPS	DAYTIME SLEEP	NIGHTTIME SLEEP	TOTAL SLEEP IN 24 HOURS
0-3 MONTHS	Evenly spread across the day and night	Varies	Varies	14 - 17
T3-6 MONTHS	4	4-5	9 - 10	13 - 15
6-9 MONTHS	3	3 - 4	10 - 11	12 14
T9-16 MONTHS	2	2 - 3	10 - 11	11 - 14
16-24 MONTHS	1	2 - 3	10 - 11	11 - 14
2 - 2 1/2 YEARS	1	Up to 2	10 - 12	10 -13
2 1/2 - 3 YEARS	0 - 1	Up to 2	10 - 12	10 - 13



“ A new baby is like the beginning of all things - wonder, hope, a dream of possibilities ”
Eda F Leshan

Newborns and naps

In those early months after your baby is born, commonly referred to as the fourth trimester I would suggest you don't focus too much on naps. Your little one is transitioning from the five-star womb service into this whole big world. Right now, your baby's sleep will be disorganised with no structure to day and night, sleep will be varied throughout the full 24 hours.

Babies also arrive nocturnal so work more on showing your baby the differences between night and day by being soft, quiet and gentle in the evening and fun and playful during the day exposing them to lots of natural daylight.

In the beginning you are your baby's safe space, they want to be held and they feel perfectly safe within your arms. This may mean lots of contact naps, try to embrace it and focus on building that loving attachment with your baby. Don't worry about forming bad habits, there are no bad habits when it comes to responding and loving your newborn to sleep.





Your newborn will have a short wakeful window of only perhaps 45 minutes to an hour, (the time a baby is awake from waking until going back to sleep). So, in the beginning it will feel like you are constantly, feeding, changing and settling to sleep. This is all very normal and which is why support in those early months can be great as broken sleep for you can be exhausting.

Establishing a rhythm for the day

During those very early weeks sleep will be very much disorganised and as I have said it is much better to focus on getting to know each other and become attuned to your baby's needs. Most parents do not want to be tied to a strict routine and to be honest your baby will most unlikely fit within the strict schedules and routines often that you can find on the internet.

However, it can be helpful to have some structure to your day with a flexible feeding and sleeping routine that is often baby led. One thing you can do in those early months is to help your baby develop their circadian rhythm (internal body clock), this doesn't happen until around three months but there are things you can do to help.

You will often find that quite naturally your baby will develop a natural wakeup and bedtime though this will be fairly late to begin with. If, however your baby is waking fairly late in the morning and sleep becomes a little all over the place, which is normal, but you would like a little more structure than I would suggest you start anchoring your day by gently waking them up at a regular time.

Start by anchoring your day, no matter what kind of night you have had (and I know this can be difficult) I would suggest having a regular awake time in the morning. Getting up no later than 7.30 with a feed within half an hour can be a positive first step in encouraging a natural rhythm to your baby's day. It will help anchor that first feed and ingrain positive sleeping practices from early on.





"For all the things my hands have held the best by far is you"

If you have a partner, they may be able to take baby once they have had that first feed if you are breastfeeding or give baby their bottle giving you some time to rest if it has been a sleepless night. Anchoring your day will help with setting up the rest of the day for naps and feeds and you can follow your baby's natural rhythm and watch for those cues. It will also give baby a sense of security and together you will soon learn what is coming next.

Another way to support your baby in the early months is to work with nature and expose your little one to natural daylight. So, open up the curtains for that wakeup in the morning and give them a lovely good morning greeting. Getting outside in the daylight is one of the best ways to help your little one's body clock develop. I also wouldn't worry about your baby sleeping in the light too, often we want to keep everything dark however, in the early months this can be an effective way of helping your baby's body rhythm become more organised.

Another tip is to remember to keep daytime noises as normal, and night times to be quiet. Most babies learn to sleep throughout all the noise of the day, it helps also when out and about and also helps them distinguish between day and night too.

Settling your baby for naps

As a new parent it can feel that a high percentage of your day is spent trying to settle your baby to sleep. In the beginning it is very normal for babies to need a lot of input from you. Like I have said don't worry that they will like to be close to you and will love a contact nap, this is very normal.

Support your baby's needs, some babies will love motion and will happily drift off with rocking in your arms, the pram or a baby rocker. Others may just love the comfort of your body and won't go down, in this case investing in a sling may be just your best investment. It can be great to be hands free and, in my experience, it was a lifesaver with a toddler to entertain too.





It is biological normal for your baby to feed to sleep and as long as you are happy this is a great way of getting your little one to sleep. It can be an idea to not get stuck with one way of soothing your baby to sleep, the more ways you can calm your baby the easier it can be to phase out the reliance of one way as your baby grows older. Some babies will rely on a particular sleep association to go to sleep, these can be feeding, rocking, patting or a comforter. This is perfectly normal and if these do become unsustainable you can change them down the line.

What I would suggest is habit stacking, this is great when the way your baby is falling asleep is becoming unsustainable. This would mean instead of using just the one way of getting your baby to sleep which your baby becomes accustomed to; you would add in other ways too. What you would do in this instance is to continue to use the usual way your baby goes to sleep but add in other soothing techniques. So, if your baby is feeding to sleep for instance, you may introduce patting, shushing or rocking to the mix. It may take a few weeks for your baby to understand but with some patience and consistency you can begin to change the reliance on the one method.

You can introduce a mini bedtime routine from as little as six weeks, it is at this time that your baby will be beginning to smile back at you. They are beginning to respond to social cues, and it is the perfect time to bring in those pre sleep rituals. Babies love consistency and to feel safe, secure and loved, they trust you to meet their needs and helping them to understand that sleep is coming next can really help.

This can help baby wind down for sleep and once established you can use this ritual for naptimes too. You may dim the lights, change their nappy, sing a lullaby or nursery rhyme, use a sleepy phrase cue such as “sleep time, baby”, give them a feed and place them in their sleep space. Doing a mini version at each nap will help them settle to sleep and it keeps things familiar and consistent for them.





Your growing baby and naps

As your baby grows and develops the same can be said for their sleep, it can be a case of you just getting into some sort of pattern when things change too. These babies certainly keep us on our toes!

Around 3-4 months your baby will begin to wake up to the world and will require much less sleep. It is a time of excitement for your baby as they experience the world, and everything is just too exciting, and they can begin to fight sleep.

Their sleep itself changes as they begin to cycle into a lighter sleep and into a deeper sleep much like we do ourselves, though their cycles are much shorter. This change from newborn sleep can be for some babies quite unsettling, this period is often referred to as the “four-month regression” a term that puts a lot of fear into parents. However, I prefer to call it a progression as that is what it is, it is in fact their sleep developing and maturing which is a good thing.

There are many things going on at this stage too which we need to consider, they are learning so much, they may be learning new skills which of course they would much prefer to practice rather than sleep. They are becoming more social and they get a serious case of fear of missing out, so fighting sleep can be normal. At this stage we would go back to you being the expert of your baby, looking for those sleep cues and understanding your baby’s own individual sleep needs

It can be useful to understand your baby’s wake windows too; I have popped a guide overleaf but again always remember that your baby’s sleep needs will be unique to them.





Wakeful windows

Below is a guide to the wakeful windows, the time between your baby waking up and them needing to sleep again. Always remember that your baby is unique as are all babies and there will be many babies that sit outside of this guide. Use it cautiously and focus more so on what your baby is communicating with you.

Newborn to 10 weeks

11 weeks - 3 1/2
months

3 1/2 months - 5
months

5 - 7 months

8 - 13 months

14 months - 3 1/2
years

45 minutes to an hour

1 hour - 1 hour and a
half

2 hours

2 1/2 hours - 3 hours

3 - 4 hours

5 - 6 hours



*"There is no foot too small,
that it cannot leave an
imprint in this world"*

Nap transitions

Pre six months your baby's naps may be disorganised, by around six months your baby may be having three regular naps or perhaps four if they are having short naps. It is still very normal for some babies to have shorter naps; they are still just learning to link those sleep cycles together and for some babies this can take a little while before their naps are consolidated.

Your baby's naps at six months may differ from other six months with some still cat napping and having 4 short naps others may have consolidated those naps to three longer naps balanced across the day. This is likely to continue until around 8-9 months when they will begin to transition from 3 or 4 naps to 2. Like with everything use the chart as a guide but watch, listen and observe your baby for signs of readiness to drop the nap.

Follow your baby's lead and unique rhythm as they will tell you what they need, and it will prevent dropping naps before they are ready too. Each baby will be ready at different times, some of the signs to look for would be:

They may take longer to fall asleep for naps.

Not falling asleep during things that usually end in sleep – e.g. feeding .

Having shorter naps, waking after 15 minutes or so.

Difficulty getting back to sleep when waking after a short nap .

Difficulty falling asleep in the evening (more than previously).

Waking more in the night.

Early morning waking.

Skipping a nap every now and then .

Reluctant to nap at a time they previously napped

During a nap transition it is common for naps to become a little topsy turvy until it settles down. You may find that some days your baby will have two naps and some days three as they navigate this transition. Try to stick with your normal morning wake up and securing that first nap.





Usually this nap will help indicate how the day will proceed, if they have taken a short nap then you may be looking to still add that third nap in, if it is longer you may find that baby will be fine with two longer naps.

For some baby's that last nap may become much shorter and they may just need a quick 20-minute power nap to get them through until bedtime. What we don't want is too long a gap between the last wake up and bedtime as you may see overtiredness creep in, and bedtime battles and wakeups occur.

Generally, I would say if for three days your baby has not taken that last nap, then you would want to work on balancing those two naps they will now be having. We don't want baby to be having a top-heavy morning and a short afternoon nap. It may take a few days of tweaking the timings to get the days balanced again.

From two to one naps

Most babies will hold onto the second nap until between 13-18 months, you can see there is a big variation as again all babies sleep needs are different. However, there is a tricky period between 10-13 months where your baby may display signs that they are ready to drop the second nap and often parents drop the nap before baby is ready.

Around 10-13 months your baby goes through so much developmentally both physically and mentally, again this can be considered as a sleep regression. Try to keep positive and consider that this stage is positive, and your baby is learning so much and many new skills that they will love to show off. So, sleep may become a little disjointed for a while.

Try to stick with two naps for as long as possible, it may be a case of getting baby to sleep another way if they are fighting their nap. Use the pushchair or a snuggle nap with them if it helps, things may settle down if you meet baby in the middle and not battle with them on this.





It may also be a case of capping the morning nap, gently waking them so they don't have too long a nap. Often some babies will have a long morning nap meaning they don't want to go down for the second nap but leaving you with an overtired little one come bedtime.

If they really are battling naps it may be clear that they are ready to go from 2 naps to 1. Ideally, we would like this to be midday so that it is balanced between wakeup and bedtime. As this transition happens the nap may happen around 10.30-11 to begin with, in this case you may need to bring forward bedtime to compensate.

Slowly over time you can edge it later and later until it is around midday so they will have a sleep after lunch, many children just manage to get through lunch though I have seen many crash in the highchair too. Follow your child and do what is right for them

Dropping the nap

This transition can be difficult, this nap can stay for quite some time with children dropping it between 2 ½ and 3 years, however it is common for children younger to drop it and also for them to keep that nap right up to starting school.





*"Babies smile while
they are sleeping,
because angels
whisper in their ears"*

I would again keep it as long as possible, as dropping it too soon can impact bedtimes, wakes in the night and early rising. Often one of the biggest signs they are ready to drop the nap is when it does impact bedtime meaning bedtime is getting later and later.

Sometimes playing around with the timing can help, bringing it forwards to a 12pm start can help. Or it may be a case of capping the nap length from 2 hours to perhaps an hour, gradually decreasing it every few days with a wake up until things settle down.

If capping the nap doesn't help it may be that your little one is ready to drop the nap, you can instead offer a quiet time instead. During the transition you may find that they may nap every other day for a little while. Bedtime may become earlier to compensate too

Incorporating balance in the day is then important, between them having fun burning energy outside and having quiet time to rest their bodies and minds too. Quiet time allows for snuggles and you may have some little naps together during this time.

Understanding your baby's needs

I have spoken throughout this guide about the importance of attachment and becoming attuned to your baby. How listening and observing your baby can help you to both understand their immediate needs and respond to them lovingly.

However, we can often miss cues, we can forget about the other important needs of your baby. Often, we think firstly about them needing to eat, to sleep and to change their nappy but what about other needs?

We can forget that our baby has feelings too, sometimes they need to be cuddled and comforted, sometimes they have a bellyache that they need you to make better. It can be a guessing game with our babies and sometimes it would be so much easier if they could just tell us.





Babies do not have the ability to self-regulate and it is therefore up to us to co-regulate in order for them to feel safe, secure and loved. This is where the confusion of them being able to self-soothe comes into play, a baby's brain is not able to self-regulate so therefore they will need your support.

Some babies will be more sensitive than others, some easy-going baby's we presume are able to self-settle. Some will say that you can teach your baby to self-soothe by leaving them to cry as they are manipulating you.

This is untrue as the brain is not developed enough and doesn't have this ability until puberty and beyond. When you leave a baby to cry all they learn is that no one will come. Self-soothing can be quite a big topic to cover in itself, and it can divide opinions. I want to assure you that you are your baby's expert and you know your baby best.

There are other needs that we can miss as tiredness, a baby could be quite obviously yawning that we can presume to be tiredness, but they could just be bored of the same toy, they may be needing a change of scenery or to change positions.

Your baby has their own unique little character, they are the manual, watch, listen and observe and know that you are doing an amazing job. They rely on you to respond with love, care and calm





Troubleshooting

Should my baby take naps in the cot ?

No, your baby does not need to take all naps in the cot. In the beginning they will love nothing better than being near you so naps in arms or in a sling can be common. Practically we cannot be inside all the time so naps in prams, pushchairs, cars are needed too. Also, some babies may like to nap in a rocker or pushchair at home. Just ensure your baby is sleeping safely, visit the www.lullabytrust.org.uk for guidance on safer sleeping.

My baby won't go down and will only sleep in my arms

Like I have said this is common in the early months but there are things you can put in place if it becomes unsustainable. I have talked about habit stacking earlier in the guide, this may be needed as you transition your baby from arms to their sleep space. How can I get my baby to nap in the cot Leading on from the last question, one thing you can do if you want your baby to take naps in the cot is to do some cot acclimatisation exercises.

This is good to do from the beginning and good to practice putting them down awake too. Often, we decorate a lovely nursery that your baby won't use as of course it is important they are in with you, if you are wanting baby in the cot in their room then spend some time in the room itself.





*" There are hard days in motherhood.
But looking at your sleeping baby
reminds you why its all worth it"*

Begin with having feeds in there and if they will lay them in the cot whilst you chat and play with them. Over the course of time begin to increase the time they are in the cot, don't leave them as it will help them to learn that this space is safe.

Offer lots of reassurance and support, you can then begin to leave the room to see how they are, you never know you may get a sneaky nap during these practices. What you would do is gently bit by bit get them to love their cot for sleep if this is your goal.

the first nap is key

The first nap of the day sets up the day, ensure you get that first nap in before they become overtired. They are often most accepting of sleep and their sleep pressure is not too high. This is a great nap to start any changes you wish to make to your child's sleep. If you are changing from say feeding to sleep to rocking and patting, then start with this nap as they are least likely to put up a fight and they are often more accepting of change at this time.

My baby is only taking short naps

In the beginning short naps can be common with naps anything from 30 minutes to 3 hours. Your baby may fall into short naps and that will fit perfectly for them. Around 4 months sleep changes for them with them going into a lighter sleep often this can be disorientating for them as they cycle between sleep cycles. The brief wake between cycles can for some babies wake them fully as it can take time to knit the sleep cycles together. They may need extra support from you in helping them back to sleep. Short naps can also be a sign of them dropping a nap too.

My baby will not nap when we are out

Some babies are more sensitive to the environment, some alert babies will love to see the world and will get a big case of fear of missing out and will battle sleep whilst out.





One tip is to keep things familiar as much as possible, give them their comforter if they have one and say your usual sleepy phrase. It may be an idea to go somewhere quieter if possible and push them in the pushchair or settle them. The snooze shade that goes over the pram or pushchair can be great for shutting out the world and allowing them a restful sleep whilst out.

My baby is resisting and fighting his naps

This may indicate that they are ready to drop a nap, or it could be down to attempting the nap a little too late. Overtiredness can be one of the main causes so watch for those early sleep cues, some babies are sneaky and are hard to read. However, if it becomes noticeable you could try putting them down a little earlier in the hope, they settle easier. It could be that the balance between naps is just a little out so then look at the nap balance over the day.

My baby takes a long nap in the morning

This can become common during the transition from 2 to 1 naps, a longer morning nap may mean that the sleep pressure is too low for an afternoon nap which can mean the gap until bedtime is too long. Depending on your baby you may need to cut the morning nap to fit in an afternoon nap or begin to push the morning nap towards midday ready for the one nap.

My baby takes a danger nap

Oh no the dreaded danger nap! Napping too close to bedtime can make parents anxious, however there are times when it just can't be helped. I always found a trip out in the car late afternoon would end up with a power nap which in turn led to a later bedtime. Sometimes you just need to go with it, you can't stop your little one falling asleep. This is often the case when they drop their naps, just try to keep them balanced as much as possible, and this won't be forever.



*" Always remember you are the expert
when it comes to your baby"*



My baby wakes through the night should I cut out the nap
This can often backfire and make sleep so much worse, from our perspective it makes sense to stop them sleeping in the day to prevent them waking at night. However often we need to look at the many other factors before cutting out the daytime sleep. Of course, some babies will sleep too much during the day and you may need to cut their naps. Again, some babies' nights may benefit from much less sleep during the day. It is being mindful to what suits your baby or child, but it is also about looking at other factors and looking at sleep holistically

I am going back to work and worried my baby wont nap in childcare
Going back to work is a big adjustment and it is natural for you to worry about their sleep in childcare. You may worry that their carer won't be able to settle them as the only way they go down to sleep is through a feed or perhaps they love their cot. However please rest assured, I have worked in nurseries and as a childminder and I promise you they will sleep. Once you have found the setting, they will usually offer some settling in sessions and also keep the communication open. Remember sleep may look a little different whilst they are in childcare as will many other things too. I have often had parents amazed that their little one has slept; this is common, and it can be the same with eating. I cared for a little one who loved to eat bananas with me but would not at home it is the same with sleep. Keep the communication open and let them know if they have had a bad night at drop off or if their sleep has changed at home.

Final word

I hope you have enjoyed this nap guide and you find it useful as you navigate naps in the early years. This is only meant to be used as a guide as always you are your baby's expert and you know what they need the best. Baby sleep can be confusing, and contradictory try not to compare your baby, follow their lead and their natural rhythm. Focus less on the schedules and guides but more on the connection between you so that you can become attuned to their nap needs

Much love

Claire xx.





MEET THE AUTHOR

Claire Holness - BA Hons (Early years) 1st class

Claire is firstly a mum to five boys and a nanny to her granddaughter and is based in Kent in the UK. She is The mamas mentor and founder of The Nurturing Hearts hub.

Claire has over 16 years experience working with families in the early years and holds numerous qualifications in her field. She is a certified sleep consultant, baby massage and yoga instructor and mindful breastfeeding supporter. Her passion in supporting families comes from her personal experience and wanting to support and empower parents in those precious early years. she has completed The holistic sleep coaching program which is alligned with her gentle, kind and responsive approach to supporting little ones sleep.

