

The Mystery of the Short Nap

By Regan L. Forsyth


The most common question that infant and toddler Sleep Coaches are asked, is about sleeping through the night. The second most common question is why babies cannot nap longer than 30 or 40 minutes.


Some parents spend what feels like an eternity to get their baby to sleep, only to have them wake 20 minutes later!

There are a number of reasons this happens. Understanding the science of baby sleep is recognizing that their sleep cycles are about 30 to 45 (ish) minutes long, give or take. When they come to the surface of sleep at the end of one sleep cycle, if the environment is not **exactly** the same as when they fell asleep, they will rouse fully, unable to slip into the next cycle unaided. With newborns, short naps are a given, so let's talk about the 4 month old and up, range.

Other reasons for catnapping are:

Scheduling/Timing Problems. At every age and stage there is a window of awake/active time and once we go past that window of awake time, we may miss the window for easy sleep. Babies become anxious and overtired, resulting in a difficult time falling asleep and a likelihood of early arousal and restless sleep. Not fun at all.




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General Daytime Awake Time Windows

- Newborn: up to 40 minutes
- 1 to 2 months: 40 to 60 minutes
- 2 to 3 months: 60 to 80
- 3 to 4 months: 60 to 90
- 4 to 6 months: 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour 45 minutes
- 6 to 8 months: Up to 2.5 hours
- 8 to 10 months: 2 to 3.5 hours

Keep in mind, that these windows for awake time depend on how rested your little one is, how restful the night or previous nap was, and how much/what kind of activity there was during awake time. There are many variables, so this is just a general guide to go from. Live Well, EPS

Inconsistency or Lack of Routine: Consistency is difficult for families on the go, but trust me...if you stick close to home for a few weeks at nap time, you'll be doing yourself a **huge** favour!

Sleep Associations: If you hold, rock, nurse/feed, swing, drive, or pacify your baby to sleep, chances are good that you will only get one sleep cycle out of your little one. When they fall asleep independently (with

no suck to sleep association, or the dreaded “transfer”, they are far ore likely to resettle themselves when they come to the surface of sleep, and then can slip right into the next sleep cycle.

So, what can parents do?

There are a few things parents can do to help babies have longer naps. And by longer, I mean past the hour mark.

Make sure that all naps happen in the same place when possible. Yes, sometimes this is tough if you are in and out with older siblings and activities, etc. but if you want to work on lengthening those naps, I really strongly suggest you stay close to home to get that routine down. Later, after this is established, the odd car or stroller nap won't affect things detrimentally.

Invest in the absolute best and darkest blackout blinds you can find. The Hypothalamus (the part of the brain responsible for regulating sleep and the circadian rhythm) is especially responsive to light. So any light coming in through the retina, indicates awake time to the baby. Likewise, the hypothalamus responds to secretions of melatonin and as such, also helps ready the body for sleep.

Avoid feeding your baby to sleep or using a pacifier to get them to sleep. Once they are 3 or 4 months, these things become habits, and hard to break ones at that! Removing the pacifier after 5 or 6 months of age can be very difficult so it's always best to do so once they pass the newborn stage, so they can learn independent sleep skills.

Put them down for naps awake but ready for sleep. Watch for tired cues, to learn your child's signals and get them in bed *before* they are fussy and crying. Avoid rocking and holding them to sleep. When they come to the surface of sleep and realize they no longer have the breast, bottle, pacifier, or you holding them, they will wake fully, rather than heading back into sleep. Babies have their REM or deep sleep at the beginning of their sleep cycles, so when we think we are waiting for them to be fast asleep before setting them down, we are actually putting them down in a period of light sleep and they wake immediately. Even if they do stay asleep, they are likely to wake after one sleep cycle because the environment is different; they are no longer in your arms.

If you follow all the above tips for a couple weeks and still see no change in nap length, then there is another trick you can employ and use as a cheat. If they wake at around the same time every nap, be nearby at that time and go in before they fully wake and try to soothe or help them into the next sleep cycle. This isn't great because they might develop a reliance on you being there, but it can help you extend the occasional nap when its needed!

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