



## Infant Sleep (Under 16 Weeks)

The first few months of a baby's life can be exhausting and challenging – both for the baby and its parents. When it comes to sleep in the first few months of life, infants do not yet have the ability to regulate their sleep cycles because their sleep system is still immature and not fully developed. As such, the first few months of life are not the time to do any formal “sleep training” with your baby. However, these first few months provide an incredible opportunity for you to begin to help your baby establish a solid sleep foundation, which sets them up for the rest of their life. It is just like when you are building a new house – a solid and well-established foundation allows you to build a strong and safe structure, and it is instrumental in allowing you to build that house efficiently. So, in a similar vein, should you decide to do any sort of sleep training once your baby is old enough (i.e., over 4 months old), having a solid sleep foundation sure makes it easier!

Over the course of their first few months of life, your baby's sleep will change periodically as they hit particular milestones in their development. Knowing what some of these changes are now will allow you to feel more prepared for them when they are happening and will give you a better sense of what you can do during these periods of development to build their foundational sleep skills. And, even when there isn't much you can do, isn't it nice knowing that it's a phase? Having a “this too shall pass” approach to parenthood can often be very helpful. Below are some of the developmental phases your baby will go through, and how you can help them during each stage.

### 0 – 8 Weeks:

The first 8 weeks of a baby's life are characterized by disorganized sleep that does not follow any specific pattern as their biological sleep rhythms, otherwise known as “**circadian rhythms**,” haven't yet developed. During these first 8 weeks, most babies will experience “**day and night confusion**,” whereby they are sleepy angels all day long, but come the nighttime, they are spending significant time awake and often crying. During this stage of sleep development, many babies will also experience **early evening fussiness**, often referred to as the “**purple crying period**” or “**the witching hour**.” This often hits somewhere between 5pm and 9pm and is characterized by intense crying and your baby being very difficult to soothe and calm. This is a **very**



**normal phase** in your baby's sleep development but can be excruciatingly difficult for caregivers, particularly new moms who are still recovering from the pregnancy and childbirth. The frustration parents feel during this stage is completely understandable, and it is important for you to know at the time that this phase **will pass**. It requires patience and at this point in time, it is completely okay to do whatever it takes for you to get your baby to sleep. A lot of people worry about creating bad habits during this phase, like rocking their baby to sleep or letting them sleep in a stroller. The reality is that babies younger than 8 weeks **cannot** form habits, so whatever you need to do in order to get through this phase and allow both yourself and your baby to get as much sleep as possible is just fine!

## 8 – 16 Weeks:

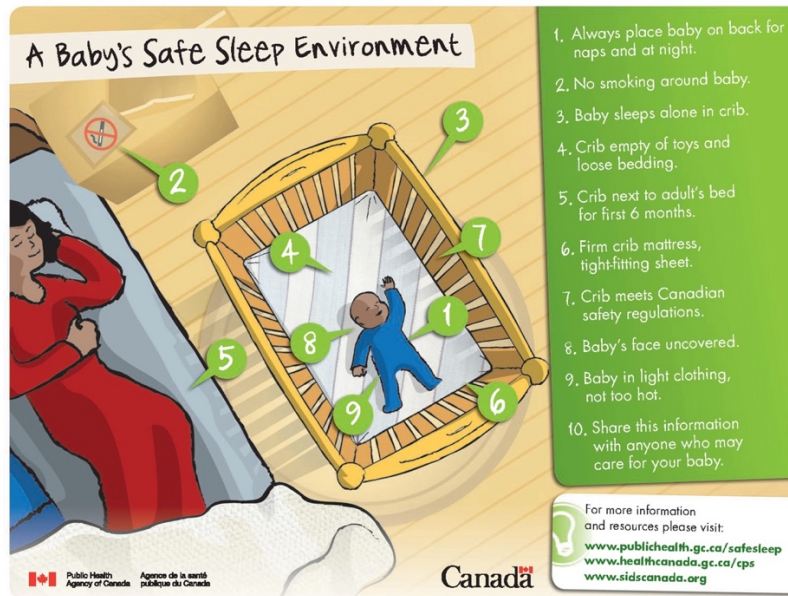
Somewhere in the 6 to 8 weeks (adjusted) range, your baby will hit his or her first sleep milestone. This is usually marked by the development of **social smiling**, where you will start to see your baby respond to you through intentional smiling as a sign of warmth and connection between you and your baby. At this point, your baby's sleep will begin to become more organized and they will start to have some longer stretches of sleep, particularly at the beginning of the night where they may give you a stretch of sleep anywhere from 4 to 6 hours. This is also the time when day and night confusion diminishes, and that difficult early evening fussiness begins to go away. Your baby will also start to get sleepy for bedtime earlier in the evening than before, creeping closer to around 7pm. This stage of development is important because at this time, your baby is first starting to show that they can respond to cues and make connections. This makes it the **ideal** time to begin to foster a healthy sleep foundation for your baby through focusing on the factors that you do have control over during this period.

Here are some tips for how you can help your baby develop a solid sleep foundation during this time:

1. Begin by providing your baby with a **consistent place to sleep**. Since your baby can now respond to cues, this is a great time to begin to introduce your baby to their crib and nursery, particularly for naps. Rather than using items like baby swings, strollers, and car rides to put your baby to sleep, this is a great time to begin to use their nursery and crib. It is still recommended that the baby sleep in your room throughout the night, but naps are a great

opportunity to allow your baby to begin to make the connection between sleep and their crib and nursery environment.

2. Establish a **safe sleep environment**. Below is an illustration of what a safe sleep environment should look like. All of these factors have been shown to greatly reduce the incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS.



3. Your baby's sleep environment should be **dark, cool, and quiet**. It is recommended that you keep the room cool, at around **17-20 degrees Celsius**. Many parents also use white noise in the sleep environment like a fan or a sound machine, as this can mask other sounds in the environment and be soothing to your baby.
4. Do not **overdress** your baby when putting them to sleep. You can dress your baby in a sleeper and a wearable blanket/sleep sack or appropriately secured swaddle, but the general rule of thumb is to dress the baby in only one thin layer of clothing more than you would dress yourself for the environment to ensure that they do not overheat. Newborns are relatively poor at regulating their body temperature and can easily overheat.



5. You want to begin to rely less on **“sleep props”** such as swings and bouncy seats, as now your baby is able to begin to make associations between sleep and their environment. Although it is still too early for sleep training, you should start to watch your baby for **sleepy cues**. When babies are 8 to 16 weeks of age, they will typically begin to show signs that they are sleepy **after 45 to 60 minutes of being awake**. Some of these sleepy cues may include zoning out, rubbing their eyes, pulling on their ears, or turning their head from side to side. If you notice any of these cues, they suggest that your baby is tired and may be trying to put him or herself to sleep. If your baby has been awake for 45 to 60 minutes, even if they are not really showing any obvious sleepy cues yet, use this opportunity to put them in their crib awake and leave them for a while. You do not need to leave them to cry – but give them a little time if they seem okay or are only fussing a little to try to complete the process of putting themselves to sleep. If your baby isn’t able to do this and begins to cry, get them and use whatever methods you normally would to get them to sleep. However, it is encouraged that you try this **at least once each day**, when your baby isn’t fussy, so that they have the opportunity to begin to practice putting themselves to sleep. It won’t work for the first several (or many!) times that you do it, but then one day it will, and your baby will fall asleep. If you continue past this point, your baby will quickly learn how to do this on their own. This is our goal!
  
6. During this phase of development, your baby is becoming more aware of his or her surroundings, and it will be more difficult for them to just close their eyes and go to sleep even when they are tired. The world is an exciting place and they are experiencing it for the first time, making it that much more exciting. This is why it is important for you to begin to observe and notice your baby’s unique sleepy cues so that you can catch them when they are happening and act on them right away in order to **avoid an overtired baby**. Why avoid an overtired baby? Because we know that the phrase “sleep begets sleep” is actually quite true! When babies are kept awake for too long, their bodies release cortisol, the stress hormone, which in turn actually makes it more difficult for them to fall and stay asleep.



7. This is also a great time to begin to establish a **soothing sleep routine** for your baby. A soothing sleep routine is helpful for a few reasons. First, just like a consistent sleep environment, the sleep routine can help cue the baby to exhibit a sleep response through conditioning. Just like you might notice your stomach begin to grumble when you enter your favourite restaurant in anticipation of eating your favourite foods, so too can the sleep routine become associated with the onset of a sleepy state through consistent and repeated pairing. So, what does a soothing sleep routine look like? Well, that's up to you. **A soothing routine is one that relaxes and calms the baby and provides a cue for them to go to sleep, rather than a means of putting them to sleep.** It might be a diaper change, baby massage, putting them into their swaddle or sleep sack, nursing, giving a short cuddle or song, turning on a white noise machine, and then lights out and putting them into their crib/bassinet. The routine does not need to take long but should be consistent to help the baby make the association between the routine and the onset of sleep.
  
8. Let's say you start your soothing routine, but your baby begins to get upset and agitated. In this case, it might be that you actually **messed some of their sleep cues** earlier on and they are now in fact just ready to go to sleep, so they need to just be placed down and given the opportunity to fall asleep. You do not need to complete your soothing routine if they are ready for sleep, just place them down and let it happen. Similarly, if your baby begins to fall asleep in the midst of your soothing routine, then just place them down awake or partially awake and allow them to finish falling asleep on their own. This shows that your soothing routine was effective and they're ready to be placed down. Alternatively, if you go through your soothing routine and after about 15 minutes, the baby is still awake but is calm, then this is also a great time to place them down awake and allow them to complete the soothing process themselves in order to fall asleep.



## To summarize, the aspects that you do have control over from approximately 8 to 16 weeks of life include:

- Providing your baby with a consistent sleeping environment
- A soothing routine
- Giving them the opportunity to self-soothe when they seem ready by placing them down at least once per day sleepy but awake

Remember, we are not talking about sleep training here or allowing your baby to cry for extended periods of time in order to get to sleep. It just means that if the baby is calm, we have done our job with the soothing routine, and we can now give them the opportunity to begin to practice self-soothing in order to complete the process of putting themselves to sleep. There really aren't any strict rules during this stage, as this is just about establishing foundational sleep skills. Your goal is to develop a soothing routine for your baby, learn and catch their sleepy cues, and attempt to get them down into their crib/bassinet before they become overtired if they aren't falling asleep on their own.

However, during this time, daytime sleep is not yet well organized, so you have little to no control over **when naps happen** or **how long naps are**. At this stage, your objective is to allow or help your baby sleep whenever they show signs of being tired. If they fall asleep for a short nap and then wake up, you may want to experiment with giving them a little bit of time to have the opportunity to soothe themselves back to sleep before getting them. Since self-soothing is a learned skill, this provides a good opportunity to begin to practice this skill. However, again, we are not talking about extended crying here, just a bit of fussing is okay at this stage. As your baby approaches the 4-month mark, you will notice that their stretches of night sleep will become longer, their bedtime will begin to creep even earlier into the evening, and their naps will become a bit more spread out during the day as their wakeful periods increase. These are all signs that their daytime circadian rhythms are beginning to develop, and their sleep system is maturing. Until then, we are just focusing on the foundational skills discussed in this handout.



## Quick Tips

1. A tight **swaddle** with your newborn's arms wrapped tightly inside is ideal for daytime and nighttime sleep. A swaddle blanket that zips or has Velcro may be helpful (e.g., Halo sleep sack swaddle, or Swaddle Me Original).
2. A **sound machine** (on a constant "white noise" setting) and a shusher (e.g., the Baby Shusher Sleep Miracle) can help soothe the baby and drown out background noise. You can increase the volume or move the sound machine closer to the baby to help soothe him or her when needed.
3. Frequent feeds throughout the daytime will help to fill your newborn's tank and allow them to have **longer nighttime stretches** of sleep (once they have regained their initial birth weight and your healthcare provider reports that growth is normal).
4. To help with day/night confusion, expose your baby to a **lot of light during the day** and dim lighting at night. Do not engage with your baby when tending to them at night so that these wakeups are not too stimulating.

## Final Notes

- There are several "leaps" (see Wonder Weeks for additional information: <https://www.thewonderweeks.com/the-mental-leaps-and-wonder-weeks/>). During these times, you may notice worsening in sleep for several days; do not worry, this is temporary!
- If you need to wear your baby in a carrier, use a baby swing, or have stroller naps, do not stress. The goal is to set a healthy foundation for sleep. That being said, any sleep is better than no sleep. As long as you continue to work on at least one crib nap per day, it will come together.
- If all else fails, at 16 weeks (with permission from your healthcare provider), you can implement sleep training methods that will help ensure your little one learns to sleep.
- Newborn sleep can feel exhausting; just remember it ends, and you and your little one **will sleep through the night!**