Ep #52: Naps Don’t Have to Be a Nightmare

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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Are you having trouble getting your baby to take long naps? Are you never sure when and how much they're supposed to be napping? Stay tuned to have all your questions answered.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you’re in the right place. Now here’s your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello, and welcome back to the *Parenthood Prep* Podcast. Today, we are gonna talk about everyone's favorite topic, naps. These can be tricky. They can be great, and then they can go downhill, and then they can be great again. Or maybe they're just kind of crappy throughout, but there's something that's really, really important for your baby. Babies need so much sleep, like at all ages.

I love to see kids napping up until three, three and a half. You know, when somebody says, oh, they dropped their nap at 18 or two years or whatever, I'm like, that is an overtired child. Unless they're sleeping, like, 14 hours at night, they still need a nap or at the very least some rest time in the middle of the day. But I think what happens is that they were never, you know, that great of a sleeper and the parent just decided it wasn't worth struggling with them anymore to get them to nap, and I totally understand that.

But if you create some good nap habits and nap routines from the beginning or even from the middle, you will have a much easier time down the road with those like toddler and older kidnaps, which is great. So how much sleep do kids need at different ages? This is obviously going to vary. A baby that's under three months is gonna be napping most of the day. They're gonna be awake for, you know, maybe an hour, maybe up to 90 minutes, and then they're gonna go back to sleep. And those naps are gonna be kind of all over the map.

They might be 30 minutes. They might be 40 minutes. They might be two and a half hours. Generally, shorter naps, we wanna try to encourage them to go back

to sleep, But if it's time for a feed or whatever, that's totally fine. I don't care if naps are short. I would rather just see them getting those naps in the beginning. There is nothing I hate hearing more than, like, hearing that a six-week old was wide awake for three hours during the day because I'm like, that is gonna be an overtired baby for me to be taken care of tonight.

When they're about three months, hopefully, they'll settle into a little bit more of a nap routine. They're not gonna be following a clock just yet, but we are going to be looking at their wake windows and saying, okay, it's been an hour, it's been 90 minutes, you're ready to go back to sleep. And we're gonna wanna instill that in a little bit more of a routine kind of way. So they're gonna be taking three naps a day, maybe four, for a total of about four hours of daytime sleep.

When they start to get to be four months, five months, we're still following those wake windows. They're gonna be getting a little longer, and we're gonna really be shooting for three naps a day. Two naps is very possible, but those two naps have to be so freaking long. Like, I have known five-month olds, six-month olds, seven-month olds to take, you know, a 90 minute nap and a two hour nap. That's great. Then that kid needs two naps.

But generally, we're looking at naps that are gonna be an hour, an hour and a half, two hours, but the other nap was an hour. And then what they need just so that that wake window between the second nap and bedtime isn't four hours and they're exhausted, we give them like a last catnap in the afternoon, which if you're on a seven to seven schedule, is usually around like four or 4:30. Your mileage may vary based on your timing. Shift your times accordingly.

Generally, the first window is gonna be the shortest, which is always so weird to me. Like, you would think after a full night's sleep that they would wanna be awake for longer, but it's actually the opposite. They're ready for that first nap so quickly. Sometimes, you know, you just do the feed and, like, play for a little bit, and then that's it. They're back down for morning nap. And that's great. You know, we really wanna keep up that routine. Like, if there was one piece of advice I could give to any new and expecting parent, it's like your baby is tired so much more often and so much quicker than you probably think they are. And

as soon as you realize that, the decision making and, like, the whole process just gets so much easier.

So where should they be napping? I mean, obviously, in a dream world, they're napping, you know, in their room in a crib or in your room in the bassinet or wherever they're, like, sleeping overnight. But, of course, that's not always the case. We want them to be flexible. We want them to be able to nap on the go. Maybe they love the stroller. Maybe you guys have a routine where you take, like, a long walk every day. You know, the weather's getting nicer and you wanna take them out in the stroller every day for a nap. That's totally fine too. They can really sleep anywhere.

Ideally, we would like them to at least be able to sleep in their crib and not be dependent on being in the stroller or in the car or whatever. But I would rather see a baby take a good long solid, like, 90-minute nap in the stroller then consistently take only 30-minute naps in the crib. Because what that does is it gets them used to just only having short naps. And, yes, it's great that you've got them napping in the crib. That's wonderful. I'm really happy for you. But if all their naps are consistently like 30 or 45 minutes, which as we know is like one sleep cycle, I want you to try and cultivate those longer naps even if it means doing something different, even if it means holding them, rocking them, whatever.

Because when we get their brains used to taking a longer and longer nap, then they're able to do it in the crib. I when I was a young, you know, college babysitter, I had so many kids just who were like so bad at napping. I had one that we had, like, the stroller for him and you would just walk loops around, like, the house, like, through the kitchen, through the living room, around the staircase, and that was his whole nap was just you trying to get him to sleep by walking him in the stroller in the house.

I remember kids falling asleep in the stroller or the car and then so carefully trying to transfer them without waking them up. If I had a time machine, I could go back. I would sleep train all these kids and get them napping super well, but I didn't know back then. And we all just dealt with it. We all just dealt with the nap

issues. And a lot of the times, the reason the parents hired me was because it was such a nightmare to, you know, deal with their kids during the day, so they hired me to just kind of follow the same routines that they were following.

Their daytime schedule for naps, like I said, wake windows up to about six months. When they're about six months, you're gonna see a lot more nap length consistency and you're gonna see them being able to hang a little bit longer. So if they wake up a little earlier from the second nap or they wake up a little earlier from the first nap, you can still do the second nap by the clock. So we say that around six months, we start following a clock schedule. Where instead of saying the first nap is at 8:30 and then the second nap is an hour and a half after they wake up from the first nap or two hours after they wake up from the first nap. We say the first nap is at nine, second nap is at one.

When they're on three naps, they're gonna generally be a long, a medium, and a short in some order. Typically, the short is the last nap, that like little cat nap in the evening. And then the the first two might flip flop. What do I mean by long and medium? I would say long is 90 minutes plus. Medium is about an hour, maybe an hour and 15, somewhere between like an hour and 90 minutes, and then short is like 45 minutes, 30 to 45 minutes, under an hour. Basically, one sleep cycle.

And again, all that third nap is doing is helping us make it through to bedtime without becoming a miserable, cranky mess. And that nap can be hard to get, so that might be a nap that's in the stroller when you're out on a walk. That nap might be in the car when you're picking up their big sister from dance class or soccer practice or whatever. That's totally fine. Should we cap naps?

This is a question I get all the time. Should we cap naps at two hours? If they're sleeping more than two hours, should we wake them up? I say no. What's more important to me rather than the length of the nap is are we pushing out the feeding for way too long? Are we going, like, more than four hours between feeds because they've been napping for so long, or are they napping so long that now we're cutting it super close to bedtime? And by the time they wake up, they're only gonna have 30 minutes, and they're not gonna be tired for bedtime.

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Bedtime is static. Bedtime is carved in stone. We want to keep the same bedtime every night. So if they're taking a nap and there's, you know, bedtime is at seven and they're sleeping until 6:15, you're not gonna be able to get them back down for bedtime. So at that point, I would wake the baby up. So it's not really about the length of the nap. It's more about what's happening at the time, if that makes sense.

And when they're little during the day and they're still, like, feeding overnight, we don't want them to do super long stretches of sleep during the day because that keeps them from eating, and then you don't get your long stretches overnight. So you might have a five hour nap during the day, and then they're up every two and a half hours overnight because they're hungry because they went five hours during the day without a feed. And I don't know about you, but for me personally, I would rather have that five hour stretch in the middle of the night.

So yeah, if you're trying to cultivate good naps, I would stress less about where it's happening and more about just making it happen, which means if the baby wakes up after 30 minutes or after a short period of time, you can pick them up, you can try to get them back to sleep rather than just getting them up. I always wanna leave them for a few minutes when they wake up, especially if they're waking up happy because I feel like they like having that space to kind of wake up fully. I mean, do you want someone running into your room as soon as you open your eyes? I mean, if you're a parent of toddlers, that's probably already happening.

And it's not great. And I don't want you to do that to your baby either. I want you to give them some time just to like enjoy their own company, to be alone in the crib, to, you know, think about their day, process their thoughts, and to start to get used to being a little bit more independent.

If you are what I call spring loaded because one of my clients said that when her babies were small, that every time they made a peep, she jumped up like a spring. They never learn to be by themselves. They never learn to, like, have that time.

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So daytime schedules. I've talked about this before. A lot of people like to follow the EASY schedule, E-A-S-Y, eat, activity, sleep, and then the Y stands for your time. I think this is a good idea in some ways, but there is a big caveat to it. There is a big pitfall, which is that when you feed them every time they wake up, the idea with this schedule is that if you feed them when they wake up instead of feeding them before they fall asleep, you'll break the habit of feeding to sleep and they will be able to fall asleep more easily without a feed, which is great. I don't want you to feed them to sleep.

But I also don't want them to get used to feeding as soon as they wake up. And there's two reasons for this. Number one, every time they wake up, they're gonna be like, "Oh, it's food time. I wanna eat. I wanna eat." Again, if you woke up in the middle of the day and Ryan Gosling was in your kitchen making you brownies, you would not go back to sleep for that nap.

And then the other thing is that because babies generally need to eat about every three hours, it can lead to shorter naps if we're feeding them when they first wake up. So say they woke up for the day at seven and you fed them, you put them down for a nap at 8:30, they slept till 9:30, now they're awake. Now it's 9:30, you fed them at that two and a half hour mark, but it's when they woke up, so you fed them. Then they're gonna, you know, be tired at 11.

You're gonna put them down to sleep, and then they're gonna maybe wake up an hour later, 45 minutes later because it's coming up on that three-hour mark since they fed. And we never really give them an opportunity to have a longer nap because their window is always causing them to be hungry while they're asleep. So what I would rather see is you detach the feeding schedule from the nap schedule.

They wake up at 9:30, you feed them at 10 or 10:30 or even 11 if we're doing like a four-hour schedule. Then when they go back to sleep at 11:30 or 12, you're gonna get a lot more sleep out of them because they're not gonna be hungry again until three or whatever. So by feeding them kind of in between their naps, you're getting a better stretch of them not being hungry, if that makes sense.

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So I would detach the feeding and the sleep schedule. Sometimes it gets a little off kilter if they're taking two naps or three naps and you're trying to do four feeds rather than five feeds, but they want five feeds. You might have to give them like a little snack here and there. But for the most part, you don't want them eating as soon as they wake up because it's not gonna give them enough time with a full belly that they're able to get a really solid next nap.

Now when you do the nap put down, if you wanna start working on putting them down awake, this is the last step I would say for sleep training because I would really work on bedtime and overnight first. I would not work on them putting themselves to sleep for naps. I think it's just harder for them. It's harder for you. Let's let them get that skill a little bit first before we start trying to put them down awake.

But your nap routine should be like a mini version of your bedtime routine. And if they've been playing and there's been a lot going on and there's a lot of light and sound, maybe you're in the car, just got home, it's chaotic. You wanna give them a little wind down time. So maybe that means playing quietly in the room with them, doing, you know, a diaper change, maybe changing them out of whatever they're wearing. If it's uncomfortable and putting them into something cozier for nap, read some books, you know, kind of just a shortened version of your bedtime routine, but definitely include some wind downtime and then do that nap.

I had a friend ask me a long, long time ago. Her kids are like teenagers now, but I was giving her some nap advice. And I said, you know, read a book and then put him down. And she said, but that's our bedtime routine. So if I read him a book, won't he think it's bedtime? And I'm like, well, first of all, yes, because it is bedtime. He's going to sleep. And second of all, she lets me tell this story because we laughed at the time and she laughs about it even more now. But second of all, your baby's not gonna suddenly sleep 1two hours in the middle of the day just because you read him a book. Like, associations don't really work like that.

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So you wanna take the time to do a little routine, a little wind down, a little mini version of your bedtime routine, and then that's your nap. If they're little and you're swaddling them, you can swaddle them. You can put them in their sleep sack. If they're older and they're wearing a sleep sack, you should definitely be using that for naps, you know, not in the stroller or the car or whatever, but definitely in their room in the crib. Put on the white noise, draw the room darkening shades, and that's it. Hopefully, you get a good nap.

Now, people want their babies to be flexible. Of course, you do. You want them to sleep in the show. You want them to sleep on the go. You want them to not need a perfect pitch black room, which is totally fine. Some babies just truly do need that to really get good quality sleep. But a lot of times, like, give them at least the opportunity to have some good naps in the crib and then, you know, when you're doing a nap on the go, that's totally fine. But I wouldn't like torture them when they're in the crib by like leaving the curtains open or whatever just because you want them to occasionally be able to sleep out in public in the sunlight, if that makes sense. I would keep their nap environment pretty great so that when they do have the opportunity to sleep in their room, it's really nice for them. I mean, that's basically it.

Around nine months, they'll go down to two naps. If they've been on three naps prior to that, they will usually go to one nap around 18 months. And a lot of times, they experience what I call the blip at like the 10 mark where it seems like they're ready to go to one nap. Maybe they're not taking their second nap, maybe they're fighting it, maybe they're just playing in the crib, but almost always, it comes back around.

And I think there's a lot of reasons for it. One of which is that they're developing a lot of new motor skills around that age and maybe they're just not quite as tired as they were before. But suddenly, once they start walking or they start standing or they start pulling up, they're using up a lot more energy and they're getting tired enough to take those two naps.

A pediatrician said to me once that every time, you know, when parents come in for the 12-month checkup, they usually tell her that they think the kids are going

to one nap. And then by the time they come back for the 15 month checkup, they're still on two naps and they haven't gone back.

If your baby's in daycare, a lot of times at one, they put them on one nap because they move them to the toddler room. And I understand that they have to do that logistically, but I think one year olds are just so tired for one nap, and a lot of times they end up falling asleep in the car on the way home or in the stroller on the way home because they just need that little bit of extra sleep.

So if your baby's struggling with one nap and they're under 18 months, you can try doing two naps, you know, and see how it goes. Good luck with everything, and definitely use their nap time to do something nice for yourself and not to do chores. Do them when your baby's awake. Have a great day. I'll talk to you soon.

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