



8 Reasons Why It Is Great for Your 2-Year-Old to Nap

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The latest sound bite that is hitting the news agencies is related to eliminating naps in children around age 2 to protect their nocturnal sleep. Instead of breaking this article apart point by point, it seemed better to use evidence that napping is important from the article's own sources.

1. If toddlers are used to napping, their body and brain expect it. Napping sleep is part of the way that their sleep demand is met for the 24-hr period.
2. Reducing napping results in a reduction of overall weekday sleep, which can affect mood and development.
3. Napping restriction increases negative emotions and decreases positive ones.
4. Problems with napping associated with poorer adaptation to preschool.
5. Napping after a language task is associated with improved language skills.
6. Infants who napped had overall better language performance, even 24 hours later.
7. Naps supported memory in kids who are accustomed to naps.
8. Children who nap had significantly less risk of accidents.

All of the statements above were from sources in the article by Thorpe et al, published last week. If you only read the abstract of this article, you would be aware that the conclusions that they drew were that naps beyond age 2 is associated with later night sleep onset and reduced sleep duration and quality. I paid the \$37 to be able to access the actual article. I got stuck on the word quality, because this is a scientific construct that has to be clearly defined. In sleep medicine, we see subjective sleep quality, something that would be an answer to the question, "How did you sleep last night?" and objective sleep quality, which would be measured by some sleep evaluation. The discrepancy between objective and subjective sleep qualities can be quite large, and this would be even more likely when we are talking about children. After some digging, I was able to see that they deferred to 3 studies from the 26 which discussed sleep quality, and only two of these studies actually defined sleep quality, one used number of awakenings, while the other used wake minutes, sleep efficiency, and sleep activity. The difference in number of awakenings in the first study was 0.8, which is less than one awakening per night; children average between 4 and 6 awakenings per night, so this is not a dramatic number. The second study found that poor nap sleep quality was associated with poor nocturnal sleep quality, not something that would indicate that naps are even the issue. So, it appears that drawing a conclusion about sleep quality was really not all that substantiated.

The reports about duration are not all that meaningful either, as we tend to look at sleep duration for the 24-hour period in young children, expecting that some of their sleep would occur in the daytime. If you expect your child needs 14 hours of sleep, a combination of 2 hours nap and 12 hours nocturnal is just as healthy as 14 continuous hours, and also more likely to occur. Kids who are over-tired tend to be more agitated, which negatively affects sleep timing. Lastly, all of the participants were study naturalistically, meaning that no kids were put in nap versus no-nap groups, but rather reported on their natural pattern. As we always say, correlation does not equal causation, which means that it would be difficult to rely on this study as evidence to make any changes in your child’s routine.

The abstract also reports that findings regarding cognition, behavior, and health impacts were inconsistent. They summarized these findings in Table 3, and here is what it actually showed:

Domain	Number of Studies	Positive outcome for naps	Negative outcome for naps
Behavior	4	2	1
Cognition	7	4	3
Health	2	2	0

To me, the outcomes actually seem more positive for the napping group than the no-nap group. Lastly, only 8 of the studies that they evaluated had the ability to compare groups aged above and below 2 years, which seems to feel that their selection of this age was practically arbitrary.

Sleep is important, and it is essential to your child’s health, growth, cognition, and behavior. Every child is different, and their sleep will vary with their differences. Naps can be a great way for children to sustain the healthy amount of sleep for their age, and work best if the timing is very consistent. Naps shouldn’t be a source of struggle between you and your child, and it can be good to offer rest time as an alternative.