



# AGES and STAGES

**Kate Farr explores three common parental headaches, and offers some creative solutions to provide relief**

In the early years, some of the most common family stressors centre around sleep – parents want more of it, their adorable offspring resist it. After just a few weeks of snatching micro-naps in between feeds and nappies, parents of newborns can find themselves completely exhausted, running on adrenaline and at the end of their tethers.

Although it can feel almost impossible to be apart from your baby in those intense first few months, it's crucial that new parents take the time to rest – as the saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup. Hand your bub over to your partner, helper, or

friend while you take the opportunity to have a long shower undisturbed, and grab some shut-eye. The smallest amounts of sleep can do wonders for your mood, help you to feel less overwhelmed and give you the energy you need to get on with your day.

Sadly, sleep deprivation doesn't just affect parents of babies. Toddler and pre-schooler sleep habits are often the hardest to alter, with any attempt at change resulting in spirited protests. The average two-year-old requires between 11 and 12 hours of sleep per night, plus a 90-minute to two-hour daytime nap, and some kids

may still need a daytime sleep up until the age of four or even older. Common wisdom suggests that sleep begets sleep, and so if your little ones are still bouncing off the walls hours after lights-out, it may be that, rather than not being tired, they are actually overtired.

Although it sounds counterintuitive, sleep experts agree that sending young children to bed earlier can actually result in a longer overall sleep time. If sleep issues persist, then it's always wise to consult a professional for guidance, as sufficient rest is critical for young children's healthy development and your sanity. ▶

## Increasing independence

The jump from pre-school to primary can often be a turbulent time for families. A new school, taking the bus and meeting new people can feel overwhelming to young children. Even outwardly confident kids can take a while to adjust to the change, and this may manifest in a number of ways. Your child may become reluctant to go to school, start throwing tantrums, or become quiet and withdrawn.

It can help for parents to become involved in school activities; joining the PTA, or supervising outings can be a good way of reassuring kids that you are still close to hand. Praising good behaviour, rather than focusing on less desirable traits will help your child feel secure, and ensuring that he has sufficient after-school downtime will enable him to recharge and process his thoughts and feelings.

If your child remains reluctant to attend school after the initial 'bedding-in' process, scheduling a meeting with his class teacher can be helpful to rule out any more significant issues, for example bullying.

Towards the end of primary school, you are likely to hear plenty of tales of other parents and how much cooler, less strict and all-round better they are than you. While this may sting, it's best to take these laments with a pinch of salt, as there is a strong chance that their child is at home making the exact same claims about you. Consider allowing a little more freedom within carefully established boundaries – for example, allowing kids to stay up late during a weekend sleepover,



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if they finish their chores in advance. This can help to reinforce trust and encourage mutual respect.

## Peer pressure

Teens often get a bad rap for being difficult, however the teenage years can be rewarding – if you choose your battles wisely, and maintain clear lines of communication. Your child is now desperate to be treated as an adult, which can be tough for parents, who remember the tousle-haired toddler days, to accept. This is the age during which kids may begin to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol and/ or drugs, leading to major conflict with their understandably concerned parents.

The first step is to be very clear with boundaries and what behaviours are – and are not – acceptable to you. Some parents will not tolerate drinking under any circumstances, while others may allow moderate consumption at home, or under adult supervision. Sit down with your teen and calmly discuss his opinions

about what is, and isn't acceptable when it comes to drink and drug use, and ask him to help you set the house rules. Despite often being perceived as reckless, many teens are surprisingly conservative in their attitudes, and so you may be surprised by their response.

Teens are often vulnerable to peer pressure. One strategy to combat this is to give them an 'out' – a well-disguised 'SOS' that they can drop into a text or phone conversation, resulting in you having to immediately collect them due to a 'family emergency'. This enables them to save face amongst their peer group, while giving them the confidence they need to escape situations that might otherwise escalate beyond their comfort zone.

An 'out' gives teens the privacy that they need, while reassuring them that you're there and ready to step in if needed. It allows them to develop their social skills, independence and resilience in a safe and supported way. **D**

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