

Early Morning Wakes

**For parents already exhausted
before the day even begins.**



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Why Your Baby or Toddler Is Waking Early (& What To Try Next)

If your little one is waking at 4:30–5:30am every morning, you're probably exhausted before the day has even started.

Early morning wakes (EMW) can feel incredibly frustrating because they're rarely caused by just ONE thing. One day you try an earlier bedtime, the next day social media tells you bedtime is too early. One person says your baby is overtired, another says they're undertired... and before long, you're questioning everything.

As a paediatric nurse, Mum of two, and sleep consultant, I know how emotionally draining sleep deprivation can be... especially when mornings begin before sunrise.

The good news?

Early wakes are often very fixable once you understand what may be contributing to them.

This guide will walk you through some of the most common causes of early morning wakes and practical strategies you can begin trialling.

Remember: Sleep is never one-size-fits-all.

What works beautifully for one child may not suit another, which is why it's important to look at the whole picture.



Early morning wakes

What Counts As An Early Wake?

Generally speaking, any wake before 6am is considered an early morning wake. While some children are naturally slightly earlier risers than others, consistent wakes around 4:30–5:30am are often a sign that something within sleep balance may need adjusting.

The challenge with early wakes is that biologically, sleep pressure is LOW in the early morning hours.

This means:

- small disruptions can fully wake a child
- overtiredness often shows up here first
- light and noise have more impact
- hunger can become more noticeable
- resettling can feel much harder than overnight wakes

Common causes of early morning wakes:

- Overtiredness**
- Undertiredness**
- Light exposure**
- Habitual waking**
- Hunger**
- Sleep Environment**



Common Causes

1. Overtiredness

This is one of the MOST common contributors to early wakes.

When babies or toddlers become overtired, cortisol and adrenaline levels can rise, making it harder for them to stay asleep in the lighter stages of sleep that occur in the early morning.

Signs overtiredness may be contributing:

- short naps
- frequent overnight wakes
- false starts after bedtime
- difficulty settling
- emotional or clingy behaviour later in the day
- waking upset early in the morning

What to try:

- review wake windows/routine
- avoid stretching wake times too quickly
- protect naps where possible
- trial an earlier bedtime for several days consistently

A common mistake parents make is assuming an earlier wake means bedtime should become later. Sometimes the opposite is true. Getting them more sleep during the day, gives them more sleep overnight - as the saying goes, "good day sleep = good night sleep".





Common Causes

2. Undertiredness

On the other hand, some children wake early simply because they're no longer tired enough to maintain sleep.

This is especially common:

- before nap transitions
- when daytime sleep needs decrease
- if naps are very long
- if bedtime is too early for their age/stage



Signs undertiredness may be contributing:

- happy early wakes
- long periods awake overnight
- taking a long time to fall asleep
- fighting naps or bedtime
- lots of energy despite the early start

What to try:

- assess total daytime sleep
- review whether wake windows need gently increasing
- consider whether a nap transition may be approaching
- avoid accidentally compensating with too much daytime sleep

I'll be honest, this was often me with my kids, because it pained me too much to cap their naps. I'd always regret it the next day come 5:30am.



Common Causes

3. Light Exposure

'Light' is the biggest driver of our body clock; early morning light can strongly tell our circadian rhythm it's time to wake up. Even small amounts of light can signal to the brain that it's time to wake for the day.

What to try:

- blackout blinds/tarps from bunnings, whatever it takes to block the window
- covering small light sources
- limiting light exposure during early wakes
- keeping the room dark during resettling attempts

4. Habitual Waking

Sometimes early wakes simply become a habit.

If a child has been waking at the same early time consistently, their body clock can begin anticipating that wake. This simply means the pattern may now need gentle, consistent support to shift.

What to try:

- consistency with responses, treating the early wake as night time
- avoiding fully starting the day too early where possible
- keeping stimulation low before your desired wake time
- gradually shifting morning timing



Common Causes

5. Hunger

For some babies, early morning wakes are genuinely linked to hunger. If a child is not taking in enough calories during the day, it makes sense that they may struggle to make it through the early morning hours without becoming hungry – particularly because sleep pressure is naturally lighter towards morning.

This can be especially common during feeding transitions, when babies are beginning solids or still working towards increasing their daytime intake. We want to ensure babies are having adequate milk intake and balanced meals across the day, including protein, carbohydrates, and other nutrients that support growth and help sustain energy for age-appropriate stretches overnight.

Low daytime intake can sometimes create a cycle where babies simply aren't taking in enough calories to comfortably make it through the night.

Some babies genuinely still need overnight feeding support depending on:

- age
- growth
- temperament
- feeding patterns
- medical history
- overall intake across 24 hours

If you're unsure whether hunger may be contributing, it's always important to discuss feeding or growth concerns with your healthcare professional.



Common Causes

6. Sleep Environment

Small environmental factors can have a surprisingly big impact during the early morning hours.

Consider:

- room temperature
- noise
- light
- birds
- household movement
- comfort
- clothing layers
- dummy replacement needs

Because sleep pressure is lighter in the morning, even minor disturbances can fully wake a child.





What to avoid

What to avoid

Constantly Changing Everything

One of the biggest reasons families become overwhelmed is trying too many things too quickly.

Changing bedtime, naps, settling technique, feeds, wake windows all at once makes it very difficult to identify what's helping.

Instead:

- make ONE adjustment at a time
- trial consistently for several days
- look at overall patterns, not just one rough morning



Assuming Later Bedtime = Later Wake

This is one of the biggest myths around early wakes. While some children may genuinely need a slightly later bedtime, overtiredness is often a major contributor to early morning waking. A later bedtime can sometimes worsen the cycle.

Panicking Over One Bad Day

Sleep is never perfectly linear. Teething, illness, development, travel, short naps, busy days, and life in general can temporarily impact sleep. A rough day does not automatically mean your entire routine needs changing.



Practical Strategies to Trial

- Focus on overall sleep balance**
- Protect bedtime**
- Watch light exposure**
- Review Naps**

Focus On Overall Sleep Balance

Instead of hyper-focusing only on the early wake itself, look at:

- total daytime sleep
- bedtime timing
- overnight wakes
- nap quality
- overall mood and behaviour

Protect Bedtime

An overtired child often struggles most in the early morning (and so does the tired parent). Protecting an appropriate bedtime consistently for several days can sometimes make a significant difference.



Practical Strategies to Trial

Be Careful With Morning Light

Any small amount of light slipping through the curtains will indicate to your child that it's morning. Then, if your desired wake time is 6:30am but the day fully starts at 5am with bright lights, breakfast, TV, and stimulation, the body clock may continue reinforcing that early start.

Where possible:

- Block out any light coming in at sunrise
- keep mornings calm before desired wake time
- minimise stimulation
- gradually shift timing where appropriate

Review Nap Timing

Sometimes even small adjustments to nap timing can significantly impact mornings. This is especially common around nap transitions (3 to 2 nap, 2 to 1 naps) and when toddler sleep challenges arise with increases in stamina.



When personalised support may help

Sometimes families try EVERYTHING and still feel stuck. That's often because early wakes are rarely solved by tips online. There's generally a lot of pieces to the puzzle that need to be put together, and that looks different for every child.

This is why personalised support can make such a difference.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, or unsure what actually applies to YOUR child, that's what I'm here for.

My sleep support calls and personalised support packages are designed to help families:

- ✓ Understand WHY sleep struggles are happening
- ✓ Troubleshoot routines and sleep balance
- ✓ Feel more confident moving forward
- ✓ Create realistic plans that actually suit their family

Lets figure out what's going on [here](#).



A final note from me...



If mornings have been feeling hard lately, I get it. I VIVIDLY remember hearing my kids cry out, checking the clock and seeing 5:30am... knowing I should probably keep things dark, stay consistent, and try to support them back to sleep.

But when you're exhausted.... survival mode kicks in.

I'd bring them into bed, put Bluey on, and hope for just a tiiiiny bit more rest. Sleep deprivation makes even the things we know feel impossible to implement consistently.

So if you're feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, or stuck in the cycle right now, please know that it's ok to get help. Having support doesn't just help your child sleep better... it helps YOU breathe a little easier too, and allows you to *enjoy* these early years that FLY by so quickly.

Dani x