

Nap/Rest Time

From the Classroom

For several years, I was an administrator in a school that served students from 18 months through 6th grade, and the bulk of our students were in our early childhood and preschool programs. So, each day after lunch, lots of our students were settling down for their nap. Lights were dimmed, calm music was playing, mats were laid out, and I have to admit there were many days that the idea of crawling in one of those rooms and catching a bit of shut eye sounded magnificent. I had a little baby at home at the time, and sleep was not something that was occurring as regularly as it once was.

While all the factors were in place for some sweet rest in the middle of the day, each year, in each classroom, there were students who didn't rest. Sometimes it was because developmentally they didn't need it anymore, and while they were in a classroom with students about the same age as them, they were in a different place

Other times, it was parents, who I later came to understand their concerns more deeply with children of my own, that didn't want their child taking a 2-hour nap at school because if they did, then they wouldn't fall asleep until quite late, and the whole cycle repeated.

Whatever the reason, this part of the day is a good illustration of the need for UDL. We have students with a wide range of developmental needs, and a one-size-fits-all approach can't meet all their needs. For those students who didn't fall asleep often, the ask was, you don't have to fall asleep, but you do have to lie there quietly, or can look at a book. Sometimes, being that still and that silent led to them falling asleep. But each year, there was a student or two who could not lie there quietly for an hour or two. Our teachers were great and often just wanted the sleepers to have a chance to fall asleep, and then they would have an opportunity to get up.

But the other reality is that for our preschool team, and maybe for some of you reading this as well, that rest time was the only break, the only planning time, that our teachers received, so if there were parents to call, reports to write, lessons to plan and prepare, that was the time to do it. We had many conversations at our school about how to create an environment that suited both the adults and the students to get their needs met and be flexible for the wide range of development and experiences that walked into our building each day.

The Purpose: Rest to Learn

For those of you working with 2, 3, and 4-year-olds, it is not hard to understand the purpose of rest time. Most of those kiddos are still taking an afternoon nap. They need to power down and get that rest.

Rest time matters so much in early childhood programs because young children are doing enormous amounts of learning and development every single day. Their brains are forming new

connections, they are regulating big emotions, navigating social relationships, and taking in massive amounts of new information about how the world works. All of that requires an incredible amount of energy.¹

Rest isn't just a break in the day; it's when a lot of that learning actually consolidates. When young children sleep, their brains are processing and organizing all those experiences from the morning. They're literally building the neural pathways that support their development. For many of our youngest learners, without that afternoon rest, they simply can't make it through the rest of the day in a way that allows them to learn and thrive.

We also know that well-rested children are better able to regulate their emotions, engage with peers, focus on tasks, and handle the inevitable frustrations and challenges that come up in a school day. A tired child is more likely to have meltdowns, struggle with transitions, and have difficulty with problem-solving. Rest time isn't just nice to have; for many of our students, it's essential to their ability to participate fully in our classroom community.

Predicting Barriers

While rest time is a need for many of our students, there still is a great deal of variability in what they need and how they best get those needs met that we can predict and proactively plan for.

- Students have widely varying rest needs. Some don't need sleep at all, some only need a short rest, and some need significant time to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- For some students, the environment they are resting in is too stimulating or uncomfortable
- For some students, the transition from school activities to quiet rest is hard

UDL-Aligned Strategies

Whether in your classroom, it is quiet time or rest time, the needs of our students range widely and will change throughout the school year.

UDL-Aligned Strategy: Dedicated Space, Multiple Solutions

Barrier: Students have widely varying rest needs. Some don't need sleep at all, some only need a short rest, and some need significant time to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Barrier: For some students, the environment they are resting in is too stimulating or uncomfortable

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1389945725003247>

Barrier: For some students, the transition from school activities to quiet rest is hard

Within your classroom community, there will be a predictable large range of rest time needs. Some students, particularly at the beginning of the year, may struggle to make it to lunch time as they tire and still need a hearty afternoon rest time. Others have outgrown that need. So how can we accommodate this wide range of student needs?

One way, if your school environment allows, is to have a couple of spaces for rest time available. One space can be dedicated to resting, and the other can be for quiet time and/or not resting.

In some schools, I have been in, this is a way teachers can work together. Students can move between classrooms. At the beginning of the year, more students might require rest, and you may need the entirety of the space. As the year goes on, the number of students needing that rest time or the amount of time needed for rest may decrease. If that is an option you and your colleagues are considering make a plan to rotate responsibilities for equity within the team. This could be a great place to leverage parent volunteers, interns, high school volunteers or other individuals that are looking to be a part of the school day and contribute.

That resting space can be outfitted with lamps, noise machines, or other amenities to create a good, quiet resting environment. If there can be a dedicated space, even if it has to be transformed each day, we can design a space that is low stimulation and calm to help all students get the rest they need. The other space could still be used for quiet time since our students may not be sleeping anymore at that time of their day; they could still benefit from some quiet, low-stimulation activities. This space could have the lights low. Students could have book boxes or audiobooks. They could be coloring or doing some other quiet, independent activities. But their need for this quiet time won't be as long as the other students, who will be resting. After a short period of quiet time, we would want some routines and activities to follow. I've been in classrooms where this is when extension activities take place, like virtual field trips, art projects, or activities aligned to student passions. In other rooms, this is when teachers are pulling students for some one-on-one work.

But Jeff, won't some students be missing out?

I get this question, and it's an important one because some teachers, parents, and students may have these exact same feelings. Students who are sleeping aren't missing out; they're getting exactly what they need at that moment. A child who is exhausted and needs that rest isn't going to benefit from an art project or a virtual field trip. In fact, we're setting them up to struggle. When we ask them to power through when their body is telling them to sleep, they'll be dysregulated, unable to focus, and more likely to have challenging behaviors for the rest of the day. The experience they need most right then is rest.

The activities happening during that extended quiet time aren't core curriculum that nappers will never experience. These are enrichment opportunities, passion projects, or small group work

that can happen at other times, too. The virtual field trip can be revisited. The art project can be offered during choice time. The one-on-one reading happens throughout the week.

The flip side to that question is what are students who don't need sleep missing out on if we force a one-size-fits-all approach? A child who is developmentally past napping but is required to lie silently on a mat for two hours is missing out on opportunities to learn, explore, create, and grow during that time. That's a significant chunk of their school day. There will be compliant children who lie quietly, but there may also be students who communicate their needs through other means, like challenging behaviors.

This is about equity, not equality. Equity means each child gets what they need, even if that looks different. The goal isn't for every child to have identical experiences every moment of the day. The goal is for every child to have their needs met so they can be their best selves and fully participate in learning.

If you don't have multiple spaces, here are a few options.

1. If you are the only preschool teacher in your school, perhaps there is someone in the school who could take that small number of students out of the room while you get the nappers going. This would be a great time for a read-aloud in the library or a nature walk, an art project, or even to have some older students read to them. After 20-30 minutes, most of the sleepers should have gotten the job done, and your nonsleepers can return ready to have some quiet time or engage in some quiet activities in the classroom.
2. Another option is to create those dual spaces in your classroom. I've been in spaces that use one part of the room for the sleepers and the other part for quiet time. If you can divide the space up with some furniture or dividers, that helps. If this is the route you have to take, then if your non-nappers can be doing something independently and quietly, like listening to audiobooks on headphones or to a quiet read-aloud on the screen, that would allow you to help get those nappers settled and those one or two that need a little extra support to get settled and still to fall asleep.

UDL-Aligned Strategy: Sensory Needs and Regulation Supports

Barrier: For some students, the environment they are resting in is too stimulating or uncomfortable

Barrier: Students have widely varying rest needs. Some don't need sleep at all, some only need a short rest, and some need significant time to fall asleep and stay asleep.

When my son was little and still napping it was always a challenge to get him to sleep. I have particularly strong memories during covid of *needing* him to nap so I'd have at least an hour to get a few things done. He was tired but regulating himself to fall asleep was not easy. There was a narrow window of time when he was tired and still where he would easily fall asleep. Outside of that he needed help regulating and laying still for sleep to come.

Some of our students have similar difficulty with regulation that meeting their sensory needs will allow us to support. For my son, a firm hand on his back, dubbed the 'dad hand' did the trick. The small amount of pressure helped him stay still long enough to snooze. While the 'dad hand' may not be an option for you, fortunately there are decent substitutes. Weighted blankets, for example, can be a game-changer for children who benefit from deep pressure input. That gentle, even weight can help a dysregulated nervous system settle in a way that simply lying on a mat cannot. Similarly, some children rest better when they have a small sensory object nearby like a small stuffed animal or comfort item to hold or fidget with quietly as they wind down. It doesn't mean they aren't resting; for their nervous system, that small input makes rest possible.

Sound is another big one. Many early childhood classrooms use soft music or white noise to support the transition to rest, and for most children, this is helpful. But for students who are easily overstimulated by environmental sounds like the hum of an HVAC system, a noise from the hallway, a peer shifting on their mat, noise-canceling headphones can be a remarkable tool. Paired with calming music or simply silence, they can create a personal sensory environment that helps even the most easily stimulated child find their way to rest.

None of these supports need to be complicated or expensive, and they don't need to be available to every child. This is UDL in action: proactively having a menu of options so that when a child needs something different, you already have a response ready. A basket with a few weighted lap pads, a set of headphones, a couple of small fidgets, and some extra pillow options can go a long way toward making rest time accessible for the full range of nervous systems in your room. If you don't have access to these items now, plan for them for the future and in the meantime let's look at how we can partner with parents to support all our students during this time.

UDL-Aligned Strategy: Partnering with Families Around Rest

Barrier: Some students simply won't need a rest anymore, or parents might not want them to rest

Barrier: Students have widely varying rest needs. Some don't need sleep at all, some only need a short rest, and some need significant time to fall asleep and stay asleep.

In that tricky year when our little ones are transitioning out of rest time or starting to near the end of it it is crucial that the school and home connection is strong. If a child naps at school that may

lead to late nights at home and a vicious cycle. If they skip nap at school that could lead to them falling asleep on the drive home. Families hold information that we simply don't have access to from inside a classroom like what time their child woke up, how long it took them to fall asleep the night before, whether they've been fighting naps at home for months, or whether a nap at school means the whole household is up until 10pm. When we bring families into the conversation about rest time early and genuinely, we get better information, and we build better plans.

At the start of the year, consider sending home a simple rest time survey as part of your getting-to-know-you intake process. Questions don't need to be elaborate. Things like: Does your child still nap at home? About how long? Is there anything that helps them settle? Are there things that make rest harder for them? Is there anything you'd like us to know or try? These questions signal to families that you see rest time as something to design together, not something that just happens to their child.

A framing that works well in practice is something like, *"Let's build a nap plan together."* This kind of language positions families as partners and experts, not just recipients of your classroom policies. It also opens the door to ongoing communication. A parent who feels like they were part of the original plan is far more likely to reach out when something changes like a new sibling, a developmental shift, a sleep regression rather than waiting until there's a problem.

This partnership matters especially for families of children with sensory needs, medical considerations, or specific cultural practices around sleep. What rest time looks like at home may be quite different from the classroom default, and knowing that ahead of time allows you to find bridges rather than friction. This nap plan will also create a place for the conversation around things like weighted blankets or noise cancelling headphones if that's not something your school can provide at the moment.

As the year goes on, keep that channel open. Rest time needs will shift. A child who was napping solidly in September may be done by January. A family's schedule may change. A brief check-in at a conference or even a quick note home like *"We've noticed Marcus is staying awake more often at rest time, has anything changed at home?"* and can keep you aligned and avoid the kind of mismatch that leads to everyone feeling frustrated.

When families feel genuinely involved in how their child's day is structured, trust grows. And that trust makes every other conversation easier.

Conclusion

I remember vividly talking to parents of young children while I was a principal at drop off, asking me to make sure their child didn't nap during nap time. At the time, I didn't quite get it. Any time my daughter was asleep meant I could be too, but once my son came along I learned, and that realization hit me hard. OH! The reason this was their primary concern each morning, above what they learned, who they played with and more was because if that child fell asleep at school, they were up late and it messed up their whole house routine. That communication was important because this child, in particular, was tired each day at that time and did fall asleep for quite a while, so we wouldn't have known otherwise.

Quiet time, rest time, nap time, whatever you call it, it's hard to meet the needs of all your kiddos in the same space. Sometimes the answer to meeting all the needs of the students in our classroom isn't in our classroom. When we universally design for all the students in our care and provide choices to remove barriers, that might mean creating choices that occur in other spaces in the school.

Ask Yourself

1. **Audit Your Current Practice:** What does rest time currently look like in your classroom and how much flexibility exists in your current approach? Which students struggle and what patterns do you notice in their challenges?
2. **Look Beyond Your Classroom:** What spaces, resources, or partnerships exist in your school that you haven't yet tapped into for creating flexible rest time options? Who could you partner with to expand what's possible, and what would need to happen to make that collaboration work?
3. **One Concrete Change:** What is one change you could implement next week to provide more choice or flexibility during rest time? How will you know if it is working? What will you observe or ask students and families to find out?

Activity

1. **Gather Your Data:** Track rest time for one week noting how many students fall asleep, how long it takes, who struggles, and who no longer needs rest. Then create a menu of five to ten quiet time activity options for students who don't need sleep, noting what resources, support, or partnerships you would need to implement each one. Use both the data and the menu together to inform your next steps.
2. **Design Your Dual Space:** Sketch two or three configurations for how you could create separate rest and quiet time spaces within your existing classroom or building. Consider furniture, lighting, sound, and materials. Then take a resource walk through your school to identify spaces, materials, and potential partners you haven't yet tapped. Document what you find with photos and notes and identify one step you could take toward your ideal setup even in a limited way.
3. **Build Team Consistency:** Schedule a meeting with colleagues teaching the same age group to discuss how you might share spaces and students during rest time. Map your overlapping practices and identify where you need more consistency. Create a shared

protocol document that outlines expectations, language, routines, and how students will transition between spaces

