

How white noise can help your little one drift off to sleep

While many parents today wrap their babies snugly, it's surprising how few use white noise to help their little ones drift off to sleep. White noise can do amazing things for fussy babies and is a super helpful cue to encourage them to fall asleep... and stay asleep longer. This special sound is just as essential as swaddling. In fact, one study involving 40 babies found that white noise helped 80% of them fall asleep in just 5 minutes! Another study showed that white noise greatly reduced crying time and made colicky babies sleepier. Even the American Academy of Pediatrics agrees that white noise can be beneficial for better sleep. Let me share how it all works—and how white noise can be a great tool for you and your little one!

Why does white noise soothe babies?

White noise is a fantastic tool for getting a good night's sleep. It helps to trigger your baby's calming reflex, acting like a built-in "reset" button to soothe their cries and help them drift off to dreamland. The best sound to calm a fussy baby is a rough, slightly harsh noise that matches the volume of their crying. You can easily create this sound by leaning in close and making a loud "Shhhhhhhhhhhhh" right by their ear. But white noise isn't just for quieting cries; a gentle, rumbling sound can also work wonders for sleep. Since it can be a bit tricky to "Shhhhhhhhhhhhh" in your baby's ear every time they nap or go to bed, using a white noise machine is a smart idea!

How does white noise make it easier for babies to sleep?

White noise is great for making a calm space for your baby, kind of like the gentle hum of a cozy teddy bear, and it signals to your little one that it's time to snooze. It works so well because it sounds a lot like the noises your baby heard while in the womb. Those soothing sounds helped them drift off to sleep back then, and they can still do the trick now. White noise also helps block out outside distractions—like a loud truck or a TV playing in another room—and even little discomforts like teething or a bit of hunger, making it easier for them to catch those ZZZs.

To begin using white noise, just play it softly in the background during your baby's bedtime routine. Before long, it will let your little one know that sleep is just around the corner. And guess what? It'll still be effective even after your baby's calming reflex starts to fade over the next 3-4 months. By that time, your baby will have figured out that white noise means it's time to snooze. So, each time you switch on the white noise, your sweet little one will think, "Oh, yes, I know that sound... I'm going to sleep so well now." (It's all very Pavlovian!)

Is it okay to use white noise all day with babies?

Just like swaddling, white noise isn't something you want to use all day long. It's important for your baby's ears and brain to have some quiet time each day to get used to the regular sounds and voices around your home. So, feel free to use white noise to help calm your little one and make naptime and bedtime a bit easier!

Are white noise machines okay for babies?

The answer is still a big YES! White noise machines are safe for babies. Just remember to keep the volume at a comfy level and a good distance from your baby's ears, and you'll be just fine. Of course, it's important not to crank the white noise machine up to the max right next to your little one's head all night long. But if your baby starts crying, it's okay to turn up the volume for a few minutes to match their cries. Once your baby drifts back to sleep – and has snoozed for about 5 or 10 minutes – you can turn the white noise back down to a soft, gentle shower sound.

Can white noise hurt a baby's hearing?

Back in 2014, there were some pretty scary headlines about white noise, like “White Noise Machines May Harm Babies’ Hearing,” “Baby Sound Machines: Too Loud? Too Close?” and “White Noise: The Wrong Noise.” Then, in late 2023, the AAP shared a report about how infants are exposed to white noise, which just added to the confusion. All this fuss started from a study on white noise published in the journal Pediatrics. In this study, researchers tested 14 white noise machines (made especially for sleeping babies) by placing them just 12 inches away from “infants’ heads”—and rotating them.

How loud do you want the white noise to be?

When your little one is feeling fussy, you might want to turn up the white noise to match their crying, which can be as loud as 100-120 decibels! Then, once your baby drifts off to sleep, gently lower the volume to around 60-70 decibels. At this level, the sound can safely play all night long. (The SNOObear will automatically switch off the white noise after 30 or 60 minutes, depending on what you choose.) Interestingly, studies suggest that sounds in the womb can reach up to 90 decibels, which is about as loud as a hair dryer, while 70 decibels is similar to the sound of a shower.

Helping your baby's peaceful sleep through white noise...

To help all babies drift off to dreamland, I really suggest playing white noise at 60-70 decibels. Trust me, white noise can be safely played all night long at this level... and it really does the trick! That's just the right amount of white noise to turn on your baby's calming reflex, which is like a natural "switch" for sleep. (This is why white noise—also called shushing—is a key part of the 5 S's for soothing babies.) A study in the journal Child & Family Behavior Therapy even found that white noise machines set at 75 decibels at bedtime—and used throughout the night—helped 1-year-olds sleep better and wake up less often, with no negative effects. Plus, a 2022 report in the journal Advances in Social Science, Education, and Humanities Research showed that white noise consistently helps infants and toddlers fall asleep and cuts down on how many times they wake up during the night. Over time, there were no significant side effects.