

## Natural Rhythms vs Set Schedules

One element of working with an infant, that is impacted by culture, is deciding to follow the child's natural rhythms or to develop a consistent schedule. Eating, sleeping, and toileting can occur based on the child's natural rhythms or on a schedule established by families or program staff.

Natural rhythms are based on the child's needs and flow. Newborns and very young infants require care based on their natural rhythms – they sleep and eat when they need to. As children grow, some families continue to allow children to eat or sleep whenever they need to, as opposed to creating set times for meals or sleep. Adults are tuned into the cues of the children and respond to the signals that demonstrate the child's sleepiness, hunger, a dirty diaper, etc. Some children are very regular and will naturally develop a set schedule themselves.

A set-schedule typically develops after the child is a few months old and is based on the child's natural rhythms. Adults recognize patterns in a child's sleeping (a long nap in the morning and short nap in the afternoon) and eating time preferences, which enables a schedule to develop based on those norms. As time goes on, the schedule becomes more regular and firm, with a predictable, predetermined timetable for eating and sleeping. Some children are not very regular and have a hard time adapting to schedules.

The following descriptions will guide you in determining if a family/program staff follows a child's natural rhythms or an established schedule.

TASK	NATURAL RHYTHMS	SET-SCHEDULE
Eating	The child eats when she is hungry. The child is fed as much or as little as she wants to eat.	The child is fed at specific times. Food is offered at set times and portion size is monitored.
Sleeping	The child sleeps when she is tired. She sleeps as long as she needs. People read her cues and know when she is tired.	The child is put down to sleep (nap or night) at specific times, for a specific period of time (11 AM-12 PM, 4-5 PM and 8 PM-8 AM).
Toileting	The child's diaper is changed when it is soiled, or she is taken to the toilet when she needs to go.	The child's diaper is changed, or she is taken to the toilet, at specific time intervals (e.g. every 2 hours).