

Sleep support – hints, tips and routines to help support improved sleep for your child.

The following advice has a number of sources, including that of The Children's Sleep Charity (www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk) and Scope Sleep Solutions (www.scope.org.uk/support/services-directory/sleep-solutions).

Disabled children are more than twice as likely to have problems with sleep as others. Without specialist support, sleep problems can continue for years. Sleep deprivation not only affects a child's learning, behaviour, mood and health but also the physical and mental well-being of the whole family. Sleep deprivation can also result in hyperactivity, making the negative cycle even worse!

Some sleep problems are common with certain impairments, so you need to take account of your child's diagnosis. But the large majority of sleep problems are behavioural, so there's a lot you can do. Experts state that if a sleep routine is implemented consistently, a significant improvement will be evident in just 2 weeks – sometimes less. Starting a new routine takes planning. Families must agree a schedule and choose a time to start it which lends itself to them having the strength to tackle it. Children are likely to object to changes and newer firmer boundaries at first, but consistency and perseverance will pay off.

The first stage of the plan involves keeping a sleep diary to establish what your child's sleep issues are. It also helps to put the picture into perspective, as sometimes your own tiredness can cause a feeling of being overwhelmed and unclear about where to begin.

Tips to help you when using the sleep diary.

- You need to complete your sleep diary honestly to use it effectively. Use extra sheets if you need to.
- If your child sleeps elsewhere, such as a respite centre or another family member's house, ask them to fill in the sleep diary. You might notice your child sleeps better there and using the diary will be able to identify why.
- Check with your school to see if your child naps in the day, or with the escort if they travel home by bus. This will affect night time sleep if the nap is too late in the day or if they are at an age where naps are not appropriate.
- Keep the diary by the bed with a pencil so that you can fill it in immediately rather than trying to remember what happened later.
- Share the diary with professionals who work in sleep to see if they can help you find a cause for your child's sleeping difficulties.
- Keep the diary for at least two weeks and then see if you can identify a pattern to your child's sleeping habits. You can then identify an area that you can start to address.

Our body's circadian rhythm (or body clock) takes its cues from light / dark and social routine. Sometimes however, children are not able to establish this for themselves. They need us to make it more explicit. **Bedtime and waking up time** must remain the same regardless of what day it is. This is essential when you are trying to regulate your child's body clock.

Unfortunately, 'Pyjama days' are not a good idea. Your child's morning routine is just as important as their bedtime one, as you are providing them those all-important routine cues to help them understand what time it is and regulate their internal clock. Get up, have breakfast, get dressed! A visual timetable to support this too is a good idea.

Many children nowadays are fascinated by technology; TV's iPads, Mobile Phones, etc. Whilst these devices all have their place, there needs to be a strict 'no screens rule' in the hour before bedtime as they emit a blue light which inhibits the production of the brain's sleepy hormone, Melatonin. Some devices have a night time mode, which diminishes the blue light, so it is a good idea to switch to this throughout the afternoon in early preparation for bedtime.

The idea of removing a much-loved device from a child probably fills a lot of parents with dread, as they know this is going to be battle on its own! For that exact reason, it is recommended that the withdrawal of screens is tackled at least three weeks before the new bedtime routine is implemented. Start to do it gradually at first, but make times every day for periods when you actively withdraw the device from your child. Use timers to warn them of the time they have left on it and replace the device for something else they enjoy. Gradually increase the amount of time you take the device away for, until they are able to be without it for thirty minutes - one hour. Once this is achieved, you are ready to begin the new bedtime routine.

The first step is putting the routine into practice an hour before the time your child is falling asleep at present. There is little point putting them to bed at 7pm if they are only falling asleep at 11pm. Once they have had a couple of days of the new bedtime and morning routine, it is then time to gradually move bedtime forward.

The first part of the routine should begin with a sleep inducing snack and drink. Good examples of these are;

- **Whole-wheat bread**
A slice of toast with your tea and honey will release insulin, which helps tryptophan get to your brain. Once there, tryptophan turns into serotonin - which murmurs: "time to sleep".
- **Bananas**
They're practically a sleeping pill in a peel! Bananas contain a bit of soothing melatonin and serotonin, as well as magnesium, a muscle relaxant.
- **Honey**
Drizzle a little in your warm milk or herb tea. Lots of sugar is stimulating. But a little glucose tells your brain to turn off orexin, a recently discovered neurotransmitter linked to alertness.
- **Warm milk**
It's not a myth. Milk has some tryptophan – an amino acid that has a sedative-like effect – and calcium, which helps the brain use tryptophan. Plus there's the psychological throw-back to infancy, when a warm bottle meant "relax, everything's fine".

- **Oatmeal**
Oats are a rich source of sleep-inviting melatonin. A small bowl of warm cereal with a splash of maple syrup is cosy – and if you've got the munchies, it's filling too.
- **Almonds and peanut butter**
A handful of these heart-healthy nuts can be snooze-inducing, as they contain both tryptophan and a nice dose of muscle-relaxing magnesium.
- **Potatoes**
A small baked spud won't overwhelm your digestion, and it clears away acids that can interfere with yawn-inducing tryptophan. To increase the soothing effects, mash it with warm milk.
- **Turkey**
It's the most famous source of tryptophan, always credited for all those Christmas naps. But that's modern folklore. Tryptophan works when your stomach's empty, not overstuffed, and when there are some carbs around, not tons of protein. So put a lean slice or two on some whole-wheat bread mid-evening, and you've got one of the best sleep inducers in your kitchen
- **Cherry juice**
Tart cherries are a natural source of Melatonin. The juice helps to increase the availability of tryptophan, an essential amino acid and a precursor to serotonin that helps with sleep.

Avoid drinks like squash (especially blackcurrant) as this tends to stimulate the bladder, leading to more night time waking.

The next phase of the routine includes closing the curtains (especially if it is light outside), dimming the lights and sitting with your child and spending time doing quieter fine finger games (such as playing with jigsaws, colouring, drawing, threading, hammer beads, playdough, Lego). These fine motor skills will encourage the brain and body to enter a calmer state.

Consider having some quiet background music on during this stage. This should be lyric free, perhaps classical or instrumental and have a specific frequency. An example would be via www.sound-healing.info/resonances/sleep/ or www.sleephabits.net/binaural-beats?sfa

You could also use some background scents at this point which also help the brain to relax. Lavender, Vanilla and Jasmine are all known for supporting sleep and relaxation (www.sleep.org/articles/scents-for-relaxation/).

Next, some proprioceptive activities will help prepare your child's body and brain for bed. Rocking lowers brain wave patterns and helps with self soothing. Some calm, slow, pushing / pulling activities, massage, cuddles or weighted blanket time is also recommended here. More information can be found via www.asensorylife.com/sensory-definitions.html

Half an hour before bedtime it is time for a bath. Scents can also be used here to continue the sensory support. The water should be warm and the lights kept dim. Avoid lots of toys in the bath as you don't want to overstimulate your child at this time. A jug and a cup for pouring might be enough for example. Use a timer to prepare your child for when it is nearly time to get out.

Don't go back downstairs after you have gone to the bathroom. Spend the next 10 minutes in your child's room, reading bedtime stories to help calm them and get used to the bedtime environment. Then it's a kiss and cuddle goodnight, and leave the room. Having a 'sleep phrase' is also useful to incorporate into the routine such as, "It's night time. Go to sleep." This can also be used if awakenings happen during the night to provide the time cue to your child and avoid any lengthy verbal exchanges.

Remember you want to leave your child when he / she is still awake, so they fall asleep in the same conditions that will remain all night (alone). If your child relies on a teddy / dummy / soother / you to go to sleep with, when they stir in the night and that item is not to hand, it will cause them to wake as they 'need' it to go back to sleep. This will probably involve them crying or shouting for you to help them retrieve the item, leading to you attempting to settle them again. Teaching children to self soothe without a tangible item is far better in the long run.

Bedroom considerations / recommendations.

- **Decor**
Colours are very important for bedrooms, as they can lead to stimulation. The best colours to have in your child's bedroom are beige, grey, light blue or light green. These are associated with coolness and calmness.
- **Room temperature**
Is your child too hot or too cold? Ideally the temperature in the bedroom should be between 16–18 C.
- **An over-stimulating bedroom**
Does your child get out of bed to play with toys? If so, your child may be over-stimulated by the bedroom environment. You will need to consider creating a restful bedroom environment. It's important that your child's bedroom is a calm and suitable environment for them to get to sleep in. Consider covering toys with a blanket at bedtime or putting them out of site to demonstrate that they are not for use.
- **Comfort**
Is their bed comfortable? Try lying on it and seeing how it feels. Is your child wet or soiled? This will cause discomfort which could impact on their ability to sleep. Many children have spatial awareness difficulties and find it difficult to 'centre' themselves in bed. Try placing pillows under their mattress sheet either side of them and by their feet to allow them to have something tangible around them to help feel more secure.

- **Bedding**
Is your child kicking the bedding off during the night and waking because they are cold? You could consider using a double duvet tucked under the mattress of a single bed. Or are they too hot or too cold? Think about what you are experiencing at night time. If you are sleeping with just a sheet on, and your child has a heavy duvet, they could be getting too hot. Bamboo bedding is good for children who are touch sensitive. It also helps regulate temperature as it absorbs moisture, preventing the user from getting too hot.
- **Noise**
Is there any noise inside or outside the home that may be disturbing your child? Some children with sensory issues, such as autistic spectrum disorders, can be particularly sensitive to noise. What may seem like a quiet sound to you can seem very loud to them. The noise of an electric fan can mask other noises in your home and may be worth considering if noise is an issue. Pure white noise apps are also available, but finding one your child likes can be a bit trial and error.
- **Light**
Is the room dark enough? Melatonin is produced when the room is dark. You might consider buying black-out blinds to make the room darker. Try using double sided Velcro to stick the blind to the window frame as this will ensure there is no light coming through the edges of the blind. Conversely, some children feel very disorientated in pitch black and may prefer a night light. Experiment with putting a light under the bed to create a 'glow' rather than a light. Alternatively, Mothercare stock Gro Lights which allow a night light to be produced from your standard light fitting. Additionally, www.lumie.com stock 'body clock wake up lights', which produce a gradual light to wake your child up in a more natural way. This can support the re-establishment of their body clock.
- **Dreamcatchers**
If your child suffers from bad dreams, a dreamcatcher can be a good way of helping them feel less anxious about going to sleep. It is a good idea to make one together and discuss how it 'works'. If your child has bad dreams after having the dreamcatcher in their room, you can say it must have 'got blocked', give it a good shake, blow into it, then it will be 're-set' and ready to catch any bad dreams the next night. If your child continues to have bad dreams, it is a good idea to talk to them about it during the day and try to help them process what they have dreamt about. Do not validate any fears (monster spray etc) but instead keep reiterating that they are safe and dreams cannot hurt them. Ensure your child does not have access to any books, TV programmes or console games that are not age appropriate as these are likely to be the cause of troubled thoughts.

Visual timetables are a great way of supporting your child's understanding of their sleep routine. Have it prepared and ready to use when you introduce the routine to your child. Involve them in each stage of the timetable: a Now and Next board is also useful to help with the transition of each stage. A social story may also be something you want to prepare in advance of the bedtime routine.

Once you have decided on the best routine for your child, prepared all your materials and consistently carried the routines out for two weeks, you should be noticing a significant improvement in your child's sleeping pattern. If you are continuing to have problems, please get in touch with our Family Support Worker, Louise who will discuss making a referral for you for some professional support.

Useful websites:

Allergy UK www.allergyuk.org Helpline: 01322 619898

Asthma UK www.asthma.org.uk Advice line: 0800 121 62 44

BackCare www.backcare.org.uk Advice line: 0845 1302704

Enuresis Resource and Information Centre (bed wetting) www.eric.org.uk Helpline: 0845 3708008

Family Lives www.familylives.org.uk/advice/your-family/special-educational-needs/sleep-advice-for-parents-with-disabled-children/ 0808 800 2222

National Eczema Society www.eczema.org Helpline: 0800 089 1122

The Lullaby Trust www.lullabytrust.org.uk Advice Line: 0808 802 6869

The Sleep Council www.sleepcouncil.org.uk Tel (for admin): 01756 791089
Freephone leaflet line: 0800 018 7923

Sleep diary for:

Date started this sheet:

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Time and length of daytime naps							
Time bedtime routine started							
Any problems?							
How were they handled?							
Time in bed							
Any problems?							
How were they handled?							
Time fell asleep							
How many night awakenings?							
How were they handled?							
Time child woke in the morning							
Total hours sleep							

Bedtime Routine

Time	Stage description	Resources needed
1. One hour before bedtime	Turn off screens. Snack Drink	Visual Timetable
2.	Close curtains Dim lights Background music Scent	
3.	Fine motor skill activity	
4.	Proprioceptive activity	
5. 30 minutes before bedtime	Bath Background music Scent One toy	Timer
6.	Into bedroom. Story (10minutes)	
7.	Kiss Cuddle Sleep phrase Eg, "It's night time. Go to sleep"	

Use this table to plan your routine. Fill in the boxes with all the resources you will need so you have it all prepared and ready for your child. Show your child the visual timetable at the start to help them understand the routine and prepare for their bedtime hour.