

Sleep: A guide for parents



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Sleep: A guide for parents

It is very common for children to have problems when it comes to sleep, in the UK it is thought that 30% of children have issues. This rises to 80% of children with a disability or a developmental disorder such as Autism or ADHD.

These problems can present in a variety of ways but most commonly as difficulty in falling asleep and waking up multiple times throughout the night. This only becomes a problem when it begins to affect your child throughout the day. For example, if your child is very sleepy during the daytime or struggling to wake up in the morning.

Most sleep problems can be helped with the simple measures described in the book, and it is rare that any medication is needed.

Another common issue can be nightmares or night terrors, it is normal for your child to experience these occasionally. However, If you believe your child is suffering due to their sleep problem, please contact your doctor for further support.



Sleep

Why is sleep important?

Sleep is essential for survival. During sleep, our bodies and brain restore and repair ready for the next day. Even more importantly for our children it is vital for

- * Building immunity
- * Developing memory
- * Maintaining concentration
- * Good growth and development

By understanding the basics of sleep, we can understand how to help our children.

What is sleep?

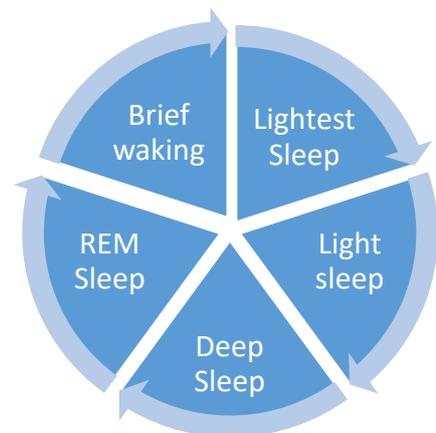
Sleep is made up of five different stages that cycle throughout the night.

Initially as we fall asleep, we enter a light stage of sleep. A period where we are most likely to awaken to a disturbance and can sometimes still be aware of what is happening around us.

We then progressively enter a deeper sleep state, when the brain is actively repairing, it is hard to wake a child up in this stage.

Following deep sleep is Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, this is the period in which we are most likely to dream, followed by a brief period of arousal, before re-entering into a light sleep and so on.

In order to get a good night sleep, we need to complete this cycle multiple times, and often we are not conscious of the brief periods of arousal in-between. But if your child wakes multiple times through the night this is problem when it is happening.



Sleep

How is sleep regulated?

Sleep is regulated by our internal “clock”, it signals when it is time for sleep and when it is time to wake up. Our level of tiredness naturally fluctuates throughout the day, this is known as our circadian rhythm.



This is regulated by internal signals (aka hormones). The biggest factor on our internal body clock is our external environment, such as the amount of sunlight we receive each day, social contact, stimulation and meal times. All of these control the release of a hormone called Melatonin. This is a key regulator of our body clock, and is what makes us feel tired at the correct time of day.

In order to help your child regulate their melatonin levels so they feel sleepy in the evening it is important to consider the following factors:

- * * Access to sunlight during the day
- * * Low level lighting in the evening
- * * No screens or devices being used in the hours leading up to bedtime
- * * Social, mental and physical stimulation during the day, but not in the last few hours before bed
- * * Breakfast within 30 minutes of waking, and not eating within two hours of going to bed

All of these things will help to increase the amount of melatonin released in the evenings, and give your child the best foundation for a restful nights sleep.

Sleep

How much sleep should my child be getting?

To enable children to wake up feeling refreshed the NHS recommend the following hours of sleep for different age groups:

Age	Hours of Sleep Advised
Babies 4 to 12 months old:	12 to 16 hours including naps
Toddlers 1 to 2 years old:	11 to 14 hours including naps
Children 3 to 5 years old:	10 to 13 hours including naps
Children 6 to 12 years old:	9 to 12 hours
Teenagers 13 to 18 years old:	8 to 10 hours

As we have just learnt there will be natural interruptions in sleep, but this should not impact on the quality of sleep that a child gets. The time to seek advice is when it is impacting on the on your child's day, for example needing excessive naps, unable to concentrate or falling asleep at school.

In this guide we use the latest research and guidance to advise you on how to help your children get the quality nights sleep they require.

Children with disabilities

We know that children with disabilities are more likely to have problems sleeping. To minimise the chances it is important that their physical health is well cared for.

Things to consider are

- ✱✱ Medications are at the correct dose to control any symptoms they may have
- ✱✱ Pain relief provided if needed
- ✱✱ Epilepsy well controlled
- ✱✱ Constipation relief

If you have concerns regarding any of the above affecting your child's sleep, please contact your doctor for further advice.

Sleep Hygiene

Most sleep problems in children can be resolved by putting good sleep hygiene into place. This is first treatment recommended for sleep disorders in children, and with persistence and consistency works to good effect.

Sleep hygiene is the process of setting up the best conditions and habits that contribute to a good night's sleep. The key thing to achieving effective sleep hygiene is consistency, the practices have to be performed regularly, in a set order to make a difference to your child's sleep. It is not an overnight fix, but in time can have very positive results.

The reason behind this is that routine is key in regulating our internal body clock.

The main parts of sleep hygiene are detailed on the following pages:

- ✳ **[Sleep environment](#)**
- ✳ **[Wind down time](#)**
- ✳ **[Bedtime Routine](#)**

Sleep Hygiene

Creating A Sleep Friendly Environment

The first step to helping your child sleep is making their room the ideal place for sleeping. It may seem like a small process but by setting up the room correctly, you can help to regulate their internal body clocks and create a relaxed sleep environment.

The most important things to consider are:

- * **Noise level** - Some children will prefer complete silence while others may like some low-level background noise e.g. white noise, or classical music. Finding the right level will help relax your child in order to fall and remain asleep
- * **Low level lighting** - Black out curtains can cut out bright outside lights that can disturb the sleep cycle. Some children may be afraid of the dark, but a warm low level night light can be used for comfort if needed.
- * **Ambient temperature** - Ensuring no extreme of temperatures will ensure comfort throughout the night and use appropriate bedding for the time of year. Around 18 degrees is ideal, you may find it helpful to invest in a room thermometer.
- * **No screens** or temptations such as video games or consoles, TV's. These stimulate children, but also the blue light inhibits the release of Melatonin (sleep regulator).
- * **No stimulation** – Bright posters, bright colourful rooms can be too stimulating for children. Try neutral coloured walls. Blue hues are thought to be the best colours for promoting sleep.
- * **Aroma** – Some children find the use of essential oils such lavender, and pillow sprays useful

Sleep Hygiene

Wind Down Time

Research as shown that a period of relaxation in the lead up to bed, help to prepare our minds for sleep and promotes the release of those important sleep signalling hormones. The wind down period can be before or incorporated into your child's bedtime routine. It is important that that the activities promote relaxation and are not stimulating.

Some ideas you could use:

- * **Shared Time** - Some children find it useful to have some shared time with their parents. A time set aside to discuss their day, or any worries that they might have. It can also be useful to go through the plans for the next day so they can be prepared.
- * **Calming activities** such as craft activities, model making, jigsaws or colouring pictures can aid relaxation.
- * **Massage** can help younger children to unwind.
- * **Music** can be very soothing and can be played in the background during the bedtime routine.
- * **Mindfulness** evidence to suggest its useful in promoting relaxation and sleep. There are a number of apps and products on the market that may be useful. You can find examples of these at the end of this guidebook.
- * **Breathing Techniques** Encourage your child to concentrate on their breathing. Take a deep breath in for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds and exhale for 6 seconds. Repeat this 4 times.
- * **Meditation** This is another good activity to try together
- * **Reading** to or getting your child to read aloud
- * **Bath time**

Sleep Hygiene

Bedtime Routine

Children are creatures of habit. Having a consistent bedtime routine is clinically proven not only to help children fall asleep quickly but also to have a less disturbed nights sleep.

A bedtime routine needs to be performed everyday, at the same time with the same set of activities that occur in the same order every night. This helps your child to know its bedtime, and mentally prepare to sleep. By being at a consistent time it also helps with the circadian rhythm.

Its important for the routine to be relaxing and ideally last around 30 minutes, but it may take longer for children with neuro-disabilities to complete. Ideally this will take place after the wind down period or a short wind down activity can be incorporated into the bedtime routine.

If your child does have a learning or neuro-disability the use of visual aids can be very helpful to support your child's understanding of the routine. Visual timetables can help to show your child what is going to happen next during the bedtime routine.

An example of a bedtime routine for a 5 year old is below:

6:00pm: Screens off. Calming activity

6:15pm: Bath time

6:30pm: Clean teeth

06:35: Pyjamas On

7:00pm: Story time

07:15pm: Lights out and bed

It is equally important to ensure that you wake your child up at the same time each morning if they are not doing so for themselves.

Helping your child to sleep independently

A common problem for children is needing a parent with them to sleep, or to help them fall asleep in the night if they wake. This can often end up with a child co-sleeping with parents. Although some parents may like this, it is the best way of rewarding poor sleep, and night time waking.

It is a difficult habit to break but it is possible. It will take time and perseverance but below are some helpful tips to encourage independent sleeping.

We have already discussed that consistency is key when it comes to children and their sleeping patterns. If your child learns to fall asleep in a certain environment or situation for example cuddled up to a parent, with a light on, or in a certain room, this is what they become accustomed to. So, when they awake in the night, they need that exact environment to be able to fall back to sleep again. For example if the parent is no longer present, the light is off, or they settled in your room and then you transferred them, they no longer feel they have the right factors needed to fall asleep, and become upset and distressed. However with a stable sleep environment and external comforts children can learn to self settle and get themselves back to sleep after waking.

You may find the following techniques helpful in getting your child to sleep independently. However it will take time and perseverance and is not an overnight fix.

Helping your child to sleep independently

Creating positive sleep associations

This technique involves using your regular bedtime routine, and finding an environment in which a child can self settle, and fall asleep independently.

Techniques to try can include:

- * Ensure that a night light is on if your child does not like the dark
- * Having a comforter or soft toy that you child can cuddle with you when they fall asleep but it still there when they wake up in the night
- * If they fall asleep with music maybe keep it on all night at a low volume, or teach older children how to turn the music back on themselves
- * Try to make sure the positive associations do not involve yourself or things that cannot be replicated through the night
- * If you currently rock or cuddle your child to sleep, start to gradually reduce the amount of time that you do this for, and then give them another sleep association as mentioned above. For example rather than rocking them until they are asleep do it for 10-15 minutes and then gradually reduce this by a minute or two until they are able to settle by themselves.
- * You can also use a similar technique of gradual withdrawal from the bedroom if your child currently settles with you in their room. As they will often need you there to settle again when they wake during the night. The first step is to sit on or by the bed, and remain until your child falls asleep. Once they are used to this stage (it may take a couple of nights) you can then gradually reduce contact or move the chair a little further away step by step, repeat this until you are out of the
- * You can also use a reward system such as a star chart to help motivate children to stick to the routine.

Additional Resources

There is lots of help and advice available for you. Below are some free resources that we feel could be particularly useful.

The Sleep Charity

Provide advice and support to empower the nation to sleep better. They also have a free support line you can call if needed.
<https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/>



Cerebra

Sleep Guide gives detailed information on how you can tackle issues to improve your family's sleep and our sleep cards offer advice on dealing with specific sleep problems.



<https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service>

Phizz

The Pzizz app helps you calm your mind, fall asleep fast, stay asleep, and wake up refreshed. It uses "dreamscapes"— a mix of music, voiceovers and sound effects designed using the latest clinical research, to help you sleep better at night.





Sleep Diary

A sleep diary is a useful tool to aid your doctor in analyzing your child's sleep pattern and assessing the effectiveness of the melatonin.

Please complete for a two-week period as accurately as possible for us to give the best advice for your child.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Details of activity pre bedtime Any caffeine, exercise, meditation							
Time put to Bed							
Time taken to fall Asleep							
Details of any issues falling asleep							
Night time waking Times and for how long							
Details of night-time waking Explain why child woke up e.g. nightmare, thirsty							
Wake Up Time							
Daytime Naps?							

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Details of activity pre bedtime Any caffeine, exercise, meditation							
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Wake Up Time							
Daytime Naps?							

References

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness>

<https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/>

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