

## A Good Night's Sleep

This is one of the most frustrating and controversial issues of raising children! Every parent will have experienced it at some time or another; however for some families it becomes a long term issue which is very hard to deal with.

There are no hard and fast rules here, instead this is a kind of pick list of things to try some of which will work better than others. Don't expect impact to be immediate, give any changes 3 weeks of nightly use before considering if they have helped or not.

Do check with your GP or Health Visitor to make sure that there are no underlying health problems.

- Consider the bedroom environment – Declutter the room, remove posters, use pastel rather than bright colours, plain paint rather than patterned wallpaper and use dimmer light bulbs.
- Try to use the room for just sleep – for example, set up a homework space in the dining room and if possible store toys in a different part of the house.
- Make sure that the bedroom is comfortable – not too hot/too cold, too noisy or too bright. Line curtains with blackout material and make sure windows are double glazed to reduce noise.
- Some children like to have a dim night light or a plug in dim LED light.
- During the night our bodies move between sleep/awake cycles. Our nervous system is programmed to notice if there has been any changes to the environment when we move to a more 'awake' stage during the night. Your child is likely to wake up if they fell asleep with a light on or music playing. So if (for example) a landing light is on a sleep time, it will need to be left on throughout the night.
- **Avoid all screen time for an hour before bedtime** (this includes television, phones and tablets). The blue light these devices release has been shown to affect the release of melatonin (a sleep-inducing hormone our body releases)
- Try to have a **bedtime routine**.
  - An hour before bed time, turn off screens, **reduce the brightness of lighting** (turn off the main light and turn on a lamp with a lower wattage bulb), have a **box of fine motor games/activities to play** (such as lego, jigsaw puzzles, play dough), **fragrance the room** with a smell your child likes, **play calming music**. Use the same piece of music each day so that your child associates that music with bedtime.
  - Providing a milky drink and a snack of slow burn food (porridge, a banana, wholegrain cereal, wholemeal toast/bread, dairy) may help to keep him asleep for longer.
  - Half an hour before bed, go upstairs and get ready for bed. Ideally this could include a bath (although if your child finds baths too sensory arousing do not include in the bedtime routine). Pyjamas on, clean teeth and share a night-time story together then into bed.
  - When he is in bed do your quick night-night ritual and go! Try not to come in again but if you do, attend to him with as little fuss and eye contact as possible unless he is really upset or obviously poorly. You want to reward for staying put not for getting attention!
  - Wake up at the same time each morning (even at weekends).
- Use a sheet under the duvet (hotel style) or blankets, or surround him with cuddly toys. This can be calming and may help his sense of where he ends and where the

world outside begins. As long as he is not too hot, use a heavy duvet as light ones can be tickly and awakening. Alternatively, try using lycra sheeting.

- Have your bedtime story sitting in a rocking chair – remember how you rocked her to sleep when she was a baby. No scary monsters, ghosts, witches or similar, and no scary programmes on the telly or computer either!
- For an older child (or grown up) try drawing a picture or writing down anything that is bothering you before you go to sleep. Worry dolls may also help – you tell them your problems then put them in a box for the night – sort of putting your worries to bed. Make sure you make time in the evening to talk about what happened during the day and to get things ready for the next day.
- Older children are likely to benefit from learning relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and ‘yoga breathing’. Online resources are available to support. Try listening to Weightless by Marconi Union (available on line for free).
- Quiet music or white noise or looking at a book may help.
- Take something that belongs to mum or dad (such as a jumper) to cuddle (also helps parents who can’t sleep when their partner is away from home).
- Have a run around and fresh air after school but not in the hour or so before bedtime.
- Try to keep to a regular, but not rigid, bedtime even at weekends. Use a timer to remind children who are too young to tell the time and give a five minute warning to pack up toys.
- Rewards and star charts work well for some children.
- Once bedtime routine is established, make sure your child is used to having a babysitter and sleeping in different beds. Move him to another room when you have guests staying, let him go to sleep overs (even though there won’t be much sleeping!) or go camping. If he can sleep in different places it will be one less thing to worry about if you have to farm them out in a family crisis.
- After a bath dry him with deep, definite dabs then apply baby lotion or moisturiser using the same movements. Try different toiletries to see if any are more calming than others – but avoid lavender for young children. Try not to rush the bath time routine.
- You cannot make your child sleep – and quite a few children need less sleep than we parents hope they need. These children are more likely to sleep if they are warmly dressed and expected to stay in the bedroom but are not pressured to stay in bed and go to sleep; as long as it is comfy it doesn’t matter if they fall asleep on the floor. For very active or very young children there may be safety issues which will need to be addressed.
- If your child normally falls asleep very late and you want bedtime to be earlier, change the bedtime gradually (e.g. 10 minutes steps). Only change again (by no more than 10 minutes) after 2-3 good nights sleep. This strategy can be used when clocks change.

**For further information and support for issues with sleep, consider contacting**

**[www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk](http://www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk)**

