

Community Paediatric
Psychology Service



NHS
Ayrshire
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Sleep difficulties


Information for you



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Most parents and carers expect that when they have a young baby their sleep will be disturbed. Sleep can continue to be difficult for some children. We know that this is more often the case for children with developmental concerns or conditions. Not getting enough sleep can impact on everyone in the family. This leaflet aims to help you understand sleep needs and provides information about ways to support and improve your child's sleep pattern.

How much sleep?

The amount of sleep we need will vary from person to person. Some people need more sleep than others, this is the same for children! It is recommended that younger children sleep for longer. For example, children up to five years need 11 to 12 hours, children over six years need 10 to 11 hours and children over nine years require nine to 10 hours (<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-much-sleep-do-kids-need/>).

It is important to know that this is a recommendation, and not all children sleep within these hours. The most important thing to understand is how much sleep your child needs and work with this.

Sleep difficulties

Sleep problems are very common for children who have developmental difficulties. This can add to further difficulties with their mood, behaviour, learning and

health. The good news is that research suggests making some changes to your children’s routine can help promote a good night’s sleep.

Why is routine so important?

We all have a circadian rhythm, which is also known as our biological clock. This runs over a 24 hour period and helps our body regulate our sleeping, feeding, body temperature and hormone production.

Light from our environment can cause wakefulness, which can affect our biological clock. For example, when the sun rises in the morning, this can encourage our bodies to stop sleeping and wake up to start the day.

When the sun goes down at night, there is less light. Melatonin is released into our brain and bloodstream. This helps communicate to our brains that it is time for sleep.

It is important to ensure your child is exposed to daylight during the day to help regulate their biological clock.



Encouraging play and exercise outside can help with this. Your child will also burn energy throughout the day to help prepare them for sleep at night.

Light and electronics

Our brains cannot tell the difference between light from outside, and light coming from electronic devices (for example, television, smartphones and tablets). If your child is using electronic devices at night, this is likely to cause them to feel awake and reduce the chance of them falling asleep. Further guidance in this leaflet can help you consider how and when to reduce electronic use in the evening.

What can I do to help?

The routines that children follow around bedtime are very important in shaping the quality of their sleep. Helping your child have a consistent, relaxing bedtime routine and a comfortable bedroom environment will help improve the possibility of sleep.

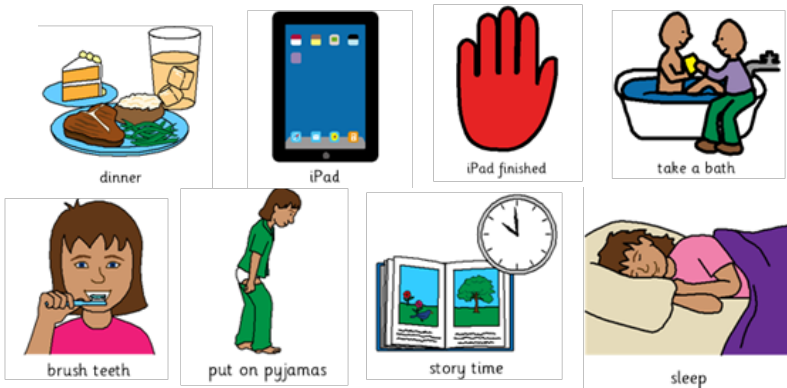
It is important to think about what parts of a bedtime routine may be more difficult for your child (for example, tooth brushing or showering). It would be helpful to consider whether these can be carried out earlier on in the evening. This can help to encourage calm activities before bedtime.

Bedroom routine

Setting a routine

Setting a regular time for bed each night and wake-up time each morning is important. Providing clear visual aids to support your child to understand when to go to bed may help with this.

Example:



Source: NLC Communication Friendly

Bedroom environment

Temperature

Make sure that the bedroom is a comfortable temperature at night. Airing the room, by having the windows open during the day, can help.

Brightness

The bedroom should be as dark as possible. This sends a clear message to our brain that it is night time and helps our body to associate this with sleep. Sometimes it can be difficult if you do not have black-out blinds, which can be very expensive. Pop-up blinds can be used instead. These can easily be removed and used in other locations (for example, when going on holiday).

Not all children feel comfortable sleeping in complete darkness. Involve your child in picking out low level lights for their room. Examples of this include fairy lights, lava lamps and glow in the dark furniture stickers.

Toys and technology

It is recommended that all toys and technology are removed or tidied away at night if possible. You can involve your child in this as part of their evening routine to help wind them down for the night. It would help to limit access to technology from an hour before your child is due to go to sleep. You can then encourage a calm activity before bedtime.

Evening time

Reduce daytime sleeping

Some children may need naps during the day, depending on their age and development. Very long naps or additional naps later in the day can result in children sleeping less at night.

Encourage calm activities

Stimulating activities (for example, watching television and playing computer games) can make it difficult for children to settle before they go to sleep at night. As recommended above, encourage your child to turn off electronics one hour before bedtime.

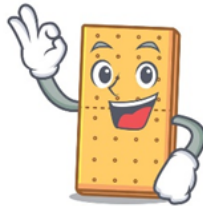
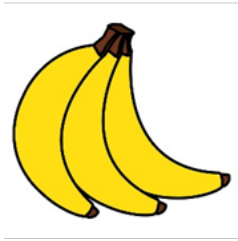
It can be helpful to introduce calm activities into your routine. Examples of these include:

- drawing and colouring in a picture with your child
- doing a jigsaw
- building with Lego
- listening to relaxing music
- reading a story.



Food and drink

It is important to avoid foods such as chocolate and fizzy drinks with caffeine between four to six hours before bedtime. This is because caffeine may cause your child to feel more alert. Large meals should also be avoided before bedtime. Try a small, healthy snack instead. This may help with settling your child to sleep (for example, Wheetabix, banana, toast or crackers).



Further things to think about

Encouragement

Offering praise and reward can help your child continue to follow a routine. This is also understood as positive reinforcement. If we provide a reward (for example, a sticker) after a desired outcome (falling asleep in your own bed), it is more likely that desired outcome will be repeated. Using a reward chart can be a great way to encourage your child to sleep.

It is important to make sure reward charts are not focused on sleeping itself, but rather the behaviours that encourage sleep (for example, sleeping in their own bed

or following an evening routine). Children may become more anxious if sleep is the main outcome, because they will already find this difficult!

Younger children may need more frequent rewards to keep their motivation up (for example, three stickers to choose a favourite dinner). For older children it may be realistic to work towards a bigger reward (for example, going to the park at the weekend) to increase their motivation.

Example of reward chart:

Ben's sleep chart

Goal: sleep in own bed

*Five stickers = pick a movie/favourite dinner

Top tips with reward charts:

- Involve your child in creating them (for example, make them colourful and creative).
- You can use stickers/stamps/ticks; what would your child like?

- Avoid sad faces and crosses (x). If your child's chart is covered in sad faces, and crosses (x) they will be less motivated to improve their sleep.
- Avoid dates and days of the week. This may highlight times where sleep is not achieved which may also decrease motivation.
- Rewards do not have to be expensive. Pick something motivating for your child, this might include spending time with family and friends, going to the park or being able to select a story before bedtime.
- Think about what is reasonable for your child. Is obtaining five stickers too easy or too difficult.

Anxiety and relaxation

Children may become anxious at night. It is important to encourage your child to talk about what is worrying them. If your child is unable to talk about this, asking them to write or draw what is worrying them may help. Children sometimes have particular fears (for example, scary monsters) and it can be helpful to reframe these to help make these fears appear less scary (for example, fluffy animals with funny voices).

Sometimes it is helpful to wrap your child in a cocoon using a flat sheet to help them feel safe and comforted at night. Further ideas might include making a tent with your child to help them create an environment in which they feel safe. (Please see the 'Neurodevelopmental

Anxiety Booklet' for further advice and strategies on how to manage anxiety).



Relaxation can be helpful to allow your child to settle. There are various relaxation techniques you can try.

Examples of techniques include:

- physical relaxation techniques
- visualisation techniques
- breathing techniques

There are a number of apps and YouTube videos that can help promote relaxation. It is worth spending some time looking through examples to see what would be best suited for your child.

Allowing time

Sleep difficulties can be frustrating and cause concern for parents and carers. It is important to remember the following:

- Progress is gradual and takes time.

- Involve your child in creating the routine and in prompting relaxing activities.
- Reduce stress and anxiety around bedtime and continue to praise your child's progress.

Frequently asked questions

My child is not tired when it is bedtime, what do I do?

Some children may be over-tired as a result of not having regular sleep throughout the night. Children who are over-tired might appear more fussy, irritable and restless. They are more likely to nap throughout the day which may result in being more alert at night. If your child struggles to sleep at night, it would be helpful to consider if they are having caffeine later in the day, or if they are taking part in activities that are overstimulating (for example, watching or playing on screens). It would also be helpful to consider whether their bedtime routine is consistent enough, or whether they are going to bed too early, or too late.

My child won't sleep without me next to them, what can I do?

This can be a difficult and frustrating experience for both you and your child. It is important to make slow and steady changes to help your child feel more comfortable

sleeping without you. First, it is important to establish a regular bedtime routine to help your child go to bed when they're tired. It is important to make sure you are making gradual changes by taking a step-by-step approach to help teach your child how to fall asleep by themselves. If we make big changes, this may cause more anxiety. This will make getting to sleep and staying asleep much more difficult.

Example of a step-by-step approach:

- Sit next to your child when they are in their own bed. Minimise conversation and give clear instructions (for example, "I'd like you to lie back down and close your eyes). If your child is looking for more comfort, you could hold their hand or rub their back.
- Once your child has become used to this (this may take several attempts) start to move your chair further away. Continue to provide clear instructions and try to minimise conversation.
- After further attempts, start to move your chair further and further away until sitting outside of the door.
- Last step, no longer remaining in room.

Encouraging your child's progress with this can help increase their motivation to sleep in their own bed. Offering them praise or helping them create their own reward chart is a great way to encourage this.

My child does not seem to need much sleep

Although sleep is important for your child's health, there is no set rule on how much sleep your child needs. Some children need more sleep than others and this can depend on a number of factors, including how active they are during the day. It is important to notice how your child is during the day when deciding if they are getting enough sleep.

Signs your child is not getting enough sleep:

- More irritable throughout the day
- Appearing drowsy and less motivated to take part in activities
- Increased napping throughout the day



My child keeps waking up in the middle of the night, what can I do to help?

Night time waking is common and there are many reasons why children may wake up in the middle of the night. If your child seems anxious when they wake in the night, having a comforter available can help to re-settle them (for example, a picture of you, a cuddly toy or blanket).

It can also be helpful to think about what time your child goes to bed and if it would be worth changing this to

encourage a full night of sleep. It is recommended that 20 minute changes in routine are put in place each week to make sure changes are slow and steady.

Completing a sleep diary can help identify any patterns which may help you to make changes to reduce night time waking.

Example of sleep diary:

Day	Time in bed	Time asleep	Night time waking	Time awake	Naps
Monday	7pm	7.45pm	1.30am to 2am 3.30am to 4.15am	6.30am	1 hour 12.30pm to 1.30am
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					

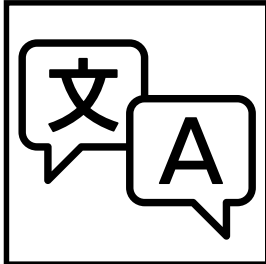
My child is so difficult when they haven't slept well, what can I do?

If we don't get enough sleep it can have a huge impact on our behaviour. If we think about the last time we had a poor night's sleep, it's very likely that we felt more stressed, irritable and had difficulties concentrating throughout the day. Children are the same when they haven't slept well. This can be really difficult to manage when we are also feeling the same way. It's important to check in with yourself and monitor how you're doing. Is there a space in the day where you can recharge? Are there others around you that can offer you some support?

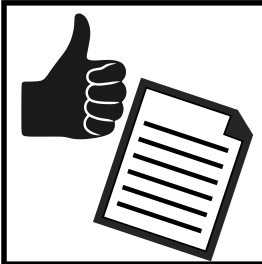
If we can make sure we are looking after ourselves, this greatly helps our ability to look after those around us.



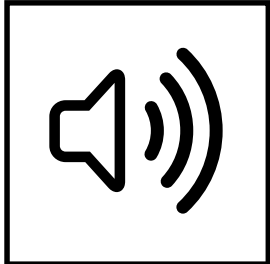
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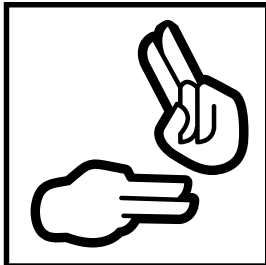
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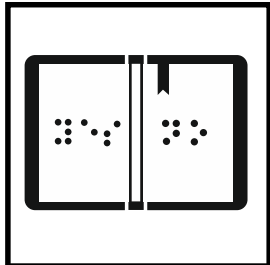
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