THE GOOD-NIGHT GUIDE FOR CHILDREN

SLEEP GOOD • FEEL GOOD •

The Sleep Council

Sleep is extremely important to support children's development both physically and mentally. Establishing good sleep patterns can help children to meet their full potential. This short guide for parents and carers will develop awareness of the importance of sleep and offer advice around what to do to prevent sleep issues occurring. It is also packed full of tips on how to manage sleep issues that may arise.

READ ON TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT:

* The importance of sleep
* Sleep cycles
* How much sleep is needed
* Good sleep routines
* Common sleep problems
* Night terrors and nightmares
* Teenagers and sleep
* Creating a calm bedroom
* Choosing an appropriate bed
* Useful resources

THE IMPORTANCE OF SLEEP

Sleep is essential to support children's development. Well rested children are more able to meet their full potential in every aspect of their lives. Listed below are just a few of the symptoms of sleep deprivation in children:

* Growth or hormone issues
* Concentration difficulties
* Mental health issues
* Lowering of the immune system
* Hyperactivity
* Weight gain
* Behavioural issues
* Difficulty remembering things

Parents who are disturbed by their child's poor sleep patterns are also likely to suffer from sleep deprivation. A well-rested household usually makes for a happier home.

SLEEP CYCLES

At night time we experience different levels of sleep and we sleep in cycles. REM and Non-REM sleep are different stages but both essential to keep us healthy. The diagram shows an example of how these cycles occur. We get our deep sleep towards the beginning of the night and our lighter sleep in the early hours of the morning.

After each sleep cycle (usually around 90 minutes, though less in infants) we come to a point of partial awakening. If everything is as it was when we fell asleep then we may just roll over and carry on sleeping. If anything has changed however... that's when we wake up! This is why it is important that a child's sleep conditions remain the same through the night. A child who needs rocking to sleep is highly likely to wake up after each sleep cycle and need a parent to rock them back to sleep. Likewise a child who has learned to fall asleep watching a lullaby show is likely to need this condition back in place to be able to nod back off.

THE STAGES OF SLEEP ARE AS FOLLOWS:

* Non-REM Sleep

Stage 1 – a very light sleep, where your child will be easily woken. If you've ever tried tip toeing out of their bedroom and they've woken up then this is why – they were in a very light sleep.

Stage 2 – still quite a light sleep but the body is preparing for the deep sleep that is about to come. Your child will be more relaxed now and if you are trying to sneak out of their bedroom then this is a good time to make your exit!

Stage 3 – this is a very deep sleep. The body needs this sleep so that repair can take place. Your child will be difficult to wake when they are in this stage.

* REM sleep

REM sleep, or rapid eye movement sleep as you may hear it referred to, is when dreams occur. It is vital for mental and emotional development. Our brains can become very active during REM sleep yet our bodies are relaxed.

CIRCADIAN RHYTHM

– what it is and what it does

We all have an internal body clock, sometimes referred to as a circadian rhythm. Our body clocks take their cue from light and dark, which can be confusing for some children when in winter we spend much of our time in darkness. It is important that we strengthen our children's body clocks so that they develop a regular sleep and wake up time. Putting them to bed at the same time each night will help, as will waking them at the same time each morning – even at the weekend! Sometimes children's body clocks can go off track, for example when changing the clocks from winter time to summer time. If bedtime has crept backwards you need to gradually reset your child's body clock by bringing it forwards by 15 minutes every three nights until you reach the desired time.

MELATONIN

Melatonin is a hormone that occurs naturally in our bodies when it gets dark. It is produced at night time to help us go to sleep. This is why it is a good idea to put your child to bed in a dark environment and to dim the lights in the run up to bedtime. Melatonin production is interfered with by screen activities for example watching television or playing on a computer. The light from the screens will stop the melatonin being produced as effectively therefore it is best to avoid these activities in the hour leading up to bedtime.

Some children, particularly those on the autistic spectrum, are prescribed melatonin to help with their sleep issues. Good sleep hygiene should still be maintained as the melatonin will not work as effectively if your child is not comfortable, relaxed and in an appropriate bedroom environment.

HOW MUCH SLEEP IS NEEDED?

Sleep needs change as children get older. Most three year olds will need around 12 hours of sleep and will be starting to drop their daytime nap. Naps in the daytime do help pre-school children to avoid becoming over-tired. Ironically an over-tired toddler is harder to get to sleep than a well-rested youngster. Naps in pre-school children should be encouraged and scheduled so that they aren't too close to bedtime.

Children around the age of four to six years old need between 10.5 and 11.5 hours of sleep on average. And as they move through school they are likely to need around 10 hours each night. Teenagers' sleep needs will be addressed later in the guide - they need around eight to nine hours but often get much less than this.

It's important to remember if your child sleeps less or more than the average it's not always an issue!

GOOD SLEEP ROUTINES

Everybody can benefit from having a good sleep routine - even grown-ups! A good sleep routine needs to be planned well in advance. Consistency and firmness are also key.

Firstly you need to consider what time bedtime will be and then work backwards, planning the hour leading up to it in some detail. If your child isn't settling until late you may need to gradually move their bedtime as previously described, the routine will need to be gradually moved too.

Here are some tips for devising the ideal bedtime routine:

* Make sure bedtime is realistic, if your child isn't falling asleep until 11pm there is no point starting a routine at 6pm
* Turn all screens off in the hour before bedtime
* Dim the lights, close the curtains if needs be and create some darkness to help to promote the melatonin (sleep hormone) production
* Offer quiet activities that are motivating to your child. Fine motor skill activities are perfect to aid relaxation eg jigsaws, colouring in, threading, building with bricks etc.
* Consider introducing supper time. Slow releasing carbohydrates are great for keeping little tummies full. Dairy products are also very calming at night time. Avoid anything sugar loaded or containing caffeine
* Baths are great if your child finds them relaxing. If however they are fearful of them or get over-excited they may not help in the bedtime routine. Ideally a bath should take place 30 minutes before bedtime as this aids relaxation by increasing the body temperature. It is the slow decrease in body temperature that helps us to feel more relaxed and nod off more easily
* Get ready for bed in the same order - for example, pyjamas on, tooth brushing, toilet
* Once in bed spend some time reading a bedtime story with your child
* Give hugs and kisses and tell your child 'it's night time, go to sleep'
* Wake them up at the same time each morning to help to strengthen their body clock

COMMON SLEEP PROBLEMS

* Self-settling

The biggest difficulty is often that children can't settle themselves to sleep at the start of the night. Some children need a parent in bed with them or rocked in a pushchair or even driving around in a car to be able to fall asleep. Once they come up through the sleep cycle to a point of a partial awakening and they find the conditions have changed they need attention. Teaching children to soothe themselves to sleep can be done gently and gradually.

* Changes in Routine

When routine is changed it can impact on sleep issues. Christmas for example is a wonderful time of the year but in January many families are still struggling to get their children to sleep. Sticking to routine as much as possible is helpful and will ensure your child feels secure.

* Feeling Hungry or Thirsty

Adding in a supper time can help with the hunger pangs at night. If a child is thirsty then offer them water. Diet is important and what is consumed during the day can impact on sleep. It is best to avoid anything sugar loaded during the evening such as biscuits and cakes. Caffeine is a stimulant so tea, coffee, cola and even hot chocolate are best avoided in the run up to bedtime. Good choices are anything calcium based such as yoghurt, fromage frais or a glass of milk. Porridge is a great supper time snack or even a banana smoothie.

* Discomfort

The bed needs to have a supportive mattress. This is particularly important for growing children. An unsupportive bed can result in aches and pains leading to problems in adulthood. According to BackCare, youngsters need a supportive bed as much as, if not more than an adult. Their research found that an increasing number of teens and even younger children are suffering back problems.

Some children may be uncomfortable due to medical conditions for example children with eczema may find it hard to get comfortable at night time. Youngsters who

are unwell or teething may also have issues getting comfortable which will impact on their sleep.

Common colds can make children feel uncomfortable and disrupt sleep patterns. A child who has recently had a hospital admission may also find their sleep is disrupted. This can be due to discomfort but can also be caused by a change in environment.

* Fear/Anxiety

Some children may genuinely be fearful of the dark. Stories normalising this fear can be helpful and there are lots of lovely ones available. Children may also want a parent with them during the night. Some children take comfort from having a parent's T-shirt over their pillowcase so that they have their familiar scent close by. Where fear or anxiety is severe it may be necessary to seek advice from your GP to see if more specialist support is required.

* Night Time Wetting

Bed wetting is common in children. The likelihood of it occurring decreases as a child gets older. Maintaining a consistent approach is useful and if your child does wet the bed try to change them in a dimly lit environment with as little interaction as possible. If you are concerned about bed wetting you can seek advice from your health visitor or school nurse.

* Sensory Issues

Sometimes children have sensory issues that impact on their night time sleep. For example if your child is very noise sensitive during the day they are likely to be the same at night time. This means that the central heating clicking on for example could wake them very easily. Some find that white or pink noise or even music can help with this issue. Children need consistency so make sure the same conditions are used throughout the night. Likewise some children are very touch sensitive and do not want to be covered at night time. This can result in them becoming too cold and waking in the early hours as a result.

NIGHT TERRORS AND NIGHTMARES

Night terrors and nightmares often get confused. Here are our tips on telling them apart and how to handle them:

Night Terrors

* Usually happen shortly after going to sleep
* Your child will appear to be terrified but is actually asleep
* Your child won't take comfort from you

What to do:

* Wait for the terror to pass and then settle them back to sleep
* When these are regular try rousing your child 10 minutes before they usually happen for two weeks to break the cycle
* Children usually grow out of night terrors, if you are concerned consult your GP

Nightmares

* Are bad dreams that children wake from
* Your child will take comfort from you

What to do:

* Reassure them that it was a dream
* Don't reinforce the nightmare – there is no need to look under beds for monsters as they don't exist remember!

TEENS AND SLEEP

In the modern world everything is 24/7 and there are far more entertaining things to do than sleep when you are a teenager. Many teens enjoy spending their evenings gaming, surfing the net or on social media sites and quite often these activities can run well into the night.

Teens do tend to feel more alert later in the evening and more tired in the morning as a result of changes in their biological clocks.

Try to share with your teen why sleep is important. A good night's sleep can help them to:

* Have spot-free skin
* Maintain a healthy weight
* Grow
* Have more energy
* Remember information for exams
* Concentrate at school, leading to them getting a better job and more money

Some general tips to share with your teens include:

* Avoiding energy drinks in the evening and anything that is sugar-loaded or full of caffeine
* Doing the same things at the same time each night can help to promote better sleep
* Turning off gaming equipment and screens an hour before bedtime can make falling to sleep much easier
* Checking whether the bed is comfortable, if not you may need to invest in a new one. Teens should be encouraged to try different mattresses to select one that they find comfortable
* Exercising regularly, three times weekly can help with sleep problems
* Decluttering the bedroom can help. It's hard to switch off when you are sleeping in a messy environment
* Try zoning areas of the bedroom for school work, play and sleep

CREATING THE PERFECT SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

A restful bedroom environment is important when addressing sleep. We all fall to sleep more easily when we are in a comfortable environment. Here are some top tips to help you create a restful bedroom:

* Make sure the room is well aired
* The temperature should be around 16-20 degrees Celsius
* Choose suitable curtains to darken the environment. Blackout blinds can be particularly helpful in the summer months
* Avoid over stimulating colours in the bedroom such as bright red. Try calming colours such as neutrals and pastel shades
* A quiet room can encourage better sleep. Check what noises can be heard from your child's room
* Eliminate electronic devices from the bedroom. If this isn't possible, try to separate areas of the bedroom for sleep and play. It's important that children and teens know that the bed is a place for rest
* Freshly laundered bedding is important
* Cover over toys if they are causing a distraction at night or zone off the room so that they are out of sight
* Check whether the mattress and the pillows are comfortable
* Are there any posters that may appear to be frightening when the lights are off?
* Move the bed away from the radiator

As children get older you can involve them in planning their bedroom design so that they have ownership of it.

BEDS AND MATTRESSES

The age at which a child is ready to move out of a cot into a bed varies but is generally between 18 months and three years. A cot bed or smaller-scale starter bed may help initially to make the transition to a single bed.

* Bunk beds

Make sure you ensure your bunk bed is safe – there are safety standards (BS EN747) and regulations (entrapment hazards) in place which manufacturers and retailers should comply with. Check the bunk is thoroughly stable; that there are two guard rails on the upper bunk (*even if it's going to be against a wall); any ladder must be firmly secured; and catches and fixings are not accessible or prominent enough for small fingers to fiddle with. Children under six years are not advised to use the top bunk.

* How often should I change a child's mattress?

Parents should aim to change the child's bed and/or mattress at significant growth periods. This may require several bed changes – for example a teenager who's suddenly shot up to 6ft plus needs a bed that will enable his feet to stay on the mattress and not hang over the end! The right mattress is vital as it must provide the correct support for growing bones and muscles. That means sufficient support to hold the spine in correct alignment and sufficient comfort layers to cradle the body's contours.

* Mattresses explained

The mattress construction can be either foam or sprung. A mattress and bedding with hypo-allergenic fillings (i.e. avoiding known irritants such as feathers or hair) may be required for a child with asthma, eczema or rhinitis.

Mattresses containing memory foam are generally not recommended for young children. If your mattress is going to be used on a bedstead or base bought separately, always check your choice is suitable for use with the type of bed base you have (slatted, mesh etc).

Don't buy second hand or use hand me down mattresses! It will not provide the support and comfort needed for growing children and could be a health or safety hazard. As well as obvious wear and tear from body weight, it is estimated that we lose around 280 ml (half a pint) of body moisture every night and shed around 0.45 kilos (1lb) of skin particles in a year. Apart from being a pretty unpleasant thought, this creates the perfect habitat for dust mites – which can aggravate both breathing and skin problems such as asthma and eczema.

CARING FOR CHILDREN'S BEDS

Caring for children's beds should follow the same lines as caring for adult beds. Here are some simple dos and don'ts:

* Do air the bed to cool and dry it by throwing back the bedclothes for around 20 minutes before remaking
* Don't sit on the edge of the child's bed. This will weaken the edge of the mattress and base by concentrating weight in the same small area
* Sprung mattresses (unless they are specifically described as non-turn) should be turned over every week for the first month and thereafter every three months (or according the manufacturers' instructions). All mattresses should be rotated occasionally head to foot. Turning helps the upholstery fillings to settle down evenly
* Don't leave polythene wrappings on new mattresses – this could lead to dampness, mildew and rotting through condensation build up during sleep
* Don't let children bounce on the bed – it damages the mattress and could hurt the child
* Don't roll up a mattress to store or squash into a car – this can cause permanent damage
* Do put washable protective covers on the mattress and the pillows. Breathable waterproof covers are also a good idea for younger children
* Occasionally – every few months – the mattress and base should be vacuumed to remove dust and fluff. For eczema and asthma sufferers vacuum weekly. This should be carefully and gently done – so as not to dislodge fillings by pulling on tufts and buttons
* Do ensure covers and bedding, including pillows and duvets, can be washed regularly at 60°C or more

STAINS

If an accident occurs immediate treatment helps enormously by preventing the liquid seeping into the upholstery filling, where it can cause problems.

If possible, after stripping off all bedding, stand the mattress on its side – this will help prevent the fluid penetrating the mattress. Sponge immediately with cold water – but don't over water. Here are some recommended treatments for specific fluids:

* **Urine**

Sponge with warm solution of mild detergent or upholstery shampoo. Then wipe with cold water plus a few drops of antiseptic such as Milton.

* **Vomit and diarrhoea**

Scrape up as much solid matter as possible, without spreading the stain. Treat as for urine above.

* **Fruit juices**

Use proprietary stain treatment – following instructions – or sponge with warm borax solution and then clear water. A strong coloured drink such as blackcurrant will probably leave a stain.

* **Tea, chocolate, coffee and milk-based drinks**

Treat as above and when dry use an aerosol grease solvent to clear grease – being particularly sparing if used on a foam mattress. Brush to clear deposit.

* **Blood**

Use a proprietary stain remover, or upholstery cleaner, followed by cold water.

* **Oily marks**

Use an aerosol grease solvent to draw stain out, rather than liquid grease solvents.

SUMMARY

All children are individuals and will have individual sleep needs. The following points are important to remember:

* Children pick up on your anxiety, try to remain calm as bedtime approaches
* A bedtime routine is extremely important to support your child in relaxing. Bedtime routines need some thought and forward planning, being consistent is essential
* Consider what may be causing the sleep issues and then you can identify the most appropriate strategy to address it. Discuss these with an appropriate professional such as a health visitor, school nurse or sleep practitioner
* It takes children time to learn a new behaviour including during the night. Follow through any changes you make for at least two weeks to begin to see an improvement
* Make sure that your child is comfortable in their bed and that the bedroom environment is a relaxing one

RESOURCES

If your child's sleep issues are causing concern you should speak to your GP. In some areas of the country there are sleep practitioners who are trained to offer support around sleep difficulties. Some children may need referring to a sleep clinic within a local hospital if medical issues are suspected to be causing the problems.

Below are some organisations that you may find useful:

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

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

The Children's Sleep Charity
www.thechildrenssleepcharity.org.uk
Tel: 07912 667676

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

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This guide has been written for The Sleep Council by **Vicki Dawson**, founder of The Children's Sleep Charity, which aims to support children and their families to get a better night's sleep. As a qualified teacher with a specialist in teaching children with special educational needs, Vicki is passionate about supporting families to get a better night's sleep. Having once been a sleep deprived mum she recognises the impact that sleep deprivation has on the whole family. Vicki has received training from Sleep Scotland and Solent NHS Trust. She works in partnership with the sleep team at Sheffield Children's Hospital and has launched an accredited sleep practitioner training programme and workshop. Vicki is also co-author of the book 'Sleep and Your Special Needs Child' which was published in May 2014.

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