

Ideas for helping your child sleep

For parents and carers of children with disabilities

The following information sheet offers tips and ideas to improve the sleep hygiene of a child with poor sleep patterns. Improved sleep can have a positive impact on mood, energy levels, health, behaviour and learning for everyone!

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The following checklist can be used as a starting point to identify causes of sleep problems:

- Is your child hungry or thirsty?
- Are they too hot or too cold?
- Has your child developed additional health issues?
- Is your child in discomfort or pain?
- Are sensory issues disrupting sleep?

If poor sleep patterns persist a more in depth look at bedtime routines, the environment and other factors may be helpful. It can be helpful to keep a sleep diary to see if any patterns emerge.

Environment

A calm, familiar and organised environment can aid sleep. It is advisable to keep the bedroom a place associated with relaxation, with familiar smells, sounds, lighting, toys and books. Try not to use the bedroom as 'time out' space as your child may associate it with negative feelings find it difficult to relax at rest times or bedtime.

Ensure the room isn't too hot or too cold, depending on your child's needs and preferences. If your child is not mobilising independently they may need extra layers. If they are unable to regulate their body temperature they may require specialist bedding.

Lighting:

Dimmed lighting can reduce stress and aid relaxation. Blackout curtains can block out early evening and early morning summer light as well as bright street lights. They can also help prevent shadows from trees or other outside structures creating potentially frightening shapes that may cause sleep problems and nightmares.

Some children might sleep better with a low light kept on. However, a dark environment is required for the production of melatonin, an essential hormone which regulates our sleep patterns.

If your child has autism, there is evidence to suggest that they may have some difficulty processing melatonin at the right times of day, which may interfere with regular sleep patterns. In this case and if all other approaches have been exhausted, you may need additional support from your GP.

Sounds

Gentle music can help your child with pre sleep relaxation as well as reading or listening to gentle stories without too much action!

For children sensitive to noise, tune in to the household or external sounds they might be hearing and if possible adjust the sound.



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Overstimulation

There are a number of ways to avoid overstimulation leading up to bedtime. It can be tempting to offer children screen time before sleep as they can appear to become relaxed. However, screen light an hour before bed can prevent deep sleep and slow down the production of melatonin. Avoid boisterous play, bright lights, loud TV as well as sugar loaded drinks and snacks, these can all contribute to difficulties getting to sleep.

Comfort

The following factors can impact on your child's bedtime comfort: Is their nightwear too tight or too loose. Are they finding bedding too light or too heavy; is the mattress comfortable; Is your child's positioning causing discomfort or pain.

Routines and Consistency

Keeping the same bedtime routine every day, including weekends and holidays can promote improved sleep patterns. This is particularly helpful for children who do not easily recognise the difference between night and day. Doing things in the same order and at the same time each night can help improve a child's sleep patterns.

It is important that night time routines are maintained by everyone involved, including respite carers and on holiday, as far as possible. Having a visual prompt of the order of the bedtime routine can be helpful for everyone.

Anxiety and Stress

Anxiety and stress can cause sleep disruptions for your child. Allow your child to talk about what's bothering them if they are able to or seek advice from your GP, they may need additional support with their feelings.

Food and Drink

If your child regularly asks for food or drink at bedtime it might be delaying tactics or you might need to rethink meal/snack times. Offer water, a child will drink water if thirsty. Being hungry can cause a child to find it hard to go to sleep as well as be unsettled during the night and early waking. A food chart marking meal and snack times and amounts eaten can help with this as well as altering meal times to be closer to bed time.

