



SLEEP– PARENTS GUIDE



SLEEP DIFFICULTIES

Having a sleep issue is surprisingly common. At any given time up to 40% of adults and 50% of children (this rises to 80% with a SEND diagnosis) have difficulties with their sleep. These problems are typically persistent and do not resolve themselves without intervention.

Quality sleep is essential for children's growth and development. A decent night's sleep will help them to do better at school, allow them to react more quickly to situations, have a more developed memory, learn more effectively and solve problems, plus it will make them less susceptible to colds and other minor ailments, less irritable and better behaved!

Sleep deprivation causes increased hyperactivity and other behavioural problems, as well as damaging physical and mental development. Poor sleep habits from an early age can lead to long term sleep problems.

WHY DOES SLEEP MATTER?

We all know that we feel better when we have had a good night's sleep, it helps our bodies to rest and repair. Sleep plays a vital role in our wellbeing.

Here are some facts that you may not know:

- Sleep helps youngsters to grow, hormones are released during the night that support growth.
- Body tissue repairs during sleep – many top sports people have sleep coaches!
- A hormone is released during sleep that regulates appetite.
- A good night's sleep helps youngsters to concentrate better and to consolidate learning.
- Immune systems are stronger when we are well rested.
- We feel less anxious when we have had adequate sleep
- Beauty sleep is a real thing – research has proven that we look better after a good kip!

When your child has sleep issues, it impacts negatively on your sleep. Lack of sleep will make it harder to concentrate and remember important things. During sleep your brain is processing all the information you've received throughout the day, forming memories and keeping it for later. If you drive and are tired your reaction times are slower, increasing the risk of an accident.

Lack of sleep can also make it difficult for you to work, impacting on your finances. Relationship issues are common too when families are sleep deprived. Our mood can be lowered when exhausted and there are close links with sleep deprivation and depression. You may find that you are more irritable and anxious, making decisions can be a challenge. Dealing with a child who is up during the night can really test your patience and you may be snappier than usual or may remove boundaries you have put in place to pacify them – this is all normal and because you are worn out.

STAGES OF SLEEP

There are four stages of sleep that everyone goes through several times each night. These are made up of two types of sleep: REM sleep and Non-REM sleep.

Non-REM sleep is made up of three stages. This is the restful and restorative sleep where your body is being repaired.

1. Non-REM sleep lowers muscle tone, body temperature, heart rate and blood pressure.

Stage N1 is where you experience light sleep, when you are nodding off but can be easily woken by a slight sound or movement. If you stay with your child until they nod off and then attempt to leave too early, they will wake up during this stage.

2. Stage N2 is a deeper sleep, you are still aware of your surroundings, but if left undisturbed you will continue to Stage N3.

3. Stage N3 (slow wave sleep) is when you are in a deep sleep and may find it difficult to awaken. This is the stage where you can carry young children to bed and they won't wake up.

4. REM (rapid eye movement) sleep is where the body switches off and the brain receives extra blood and processes the day's events. This sleep consolidates learning and helps develop social and emotional abilities. In REM sleep you dream and during this period of sleep your body is deeply relaxed.

WHY CHILDREN MAY WAKE IN THE NIGHT

Your child is more likely to wake if conditions have changed while they have been asleep. If they fall asleep with the landing light on and you switch it off when you go to bed this may trigger a waking. Or if you have invested in a product that provides light/sound and switches off, this too could cause them to wake. The key thing to learn from this is that conditions should be consistent all the way through the night for you to reduce your chances of them waking once they have nodded off.

Nightmares/Night Terrors These often get confused but are very different. A nightmare is a frightening dream, and a child will wake up fully and take comfort from you. It is important to give them reassurance as they can be extremely scary. In younger children, they can't always distinguish between what is real and what isn't so don't be quick to say it isn't real. However, don't reinforce the nightmare – there is no need to look under beds for monsters as they don't exist remember! A night terror usually happens at the start of the night and the child may appear to be awake but is still asleep.

Sometimes nightmares happen as the body's response to wake you when you need the toilet or when you have lain awkwardly and are causing pins and needles. Take the child to the toilet, give reassurance and settle them back into bed.

A night terror is when a child is still asleep and they will not take comfort from you as they are still asleep. You need to wait until the terror passes, they will then usually continue sleeping. They can be linked with sleep deprivation and increased temperatures, so try to keep the room cool.

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO WE NEED?

Every child is an individual and sleep needs can vary. The following information is from a book by Lyn Quine and gives an approximate guide. The most important thing is to note whether your child is showing signs of sleep deprivation when trying to work out their ideal number of hours snoozing.

AVERAGE HOURS OF SLEEP NEEDED					
AGE	AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS NEEDED		AGE	AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS NEEDED	
	DAYTIME	NIGHTTIME		DAYTIME	NIGHTTIME
1 WEEK	8	8½	7 YEARS	-	10½
4 WEEKS	6¾	8¾	8 YEARS	-	10¼
3 MONTHS	5	10	9 YEARS	-	10
6 MONTHS	4	10	10 YEARS	-	9¾
9 MONTHS	2¾	11¼	11 YEARS	-	9½
12 MONTHS	2½	11½	12 YEARS	-	9½
2 YEARS	1¼	11¾	13 YEARS	-	9¼
3 YEARS	1	11	14 YEARS	-	9
4 YEARS	-	11½	15 YEARS	-	8¾
5 YEARS	-	11	16 YEARS	-	8½
6 YEARS	-	10¾			

SLEEP DIARIES

If you are worried about your child's sleep, keeping a sleep diary may be helpful. Sleep diaries can help you to find reasons why your child is not sleeping. It is important that you log everything for at least two weeks to see if any patterns emerge. An example of a sleep diary can be found here: <https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/The-Sleep-Charity-Teens-Sleep-Diary.pdf>

After 2 weeks review the diary. Here are some things to think about:

- The length of time it takes your child to nod off at the start of the night. If it is more than 30 minutes this needs to be a focus and may indicate that they need a slightly later bedtime.
- Once your child is asleep do they wake during the night? If so can you identify a reason for this? Has anything changed since they went to bed? Think about the light, noise, whether you usually stay with them.

The time your child wakes in the morning should be consistent throughout the week, including weekends, to strengthen their circadian rhythm. Likewise, the time your child falls to sleep should be the same, routine is key when it comes to sleep and keeping the body clock on track.

- The amount of sleep your child is getting each night can now be calculated using the diaries.
- Sharing this information with a professional can be helpful, sometimes it is hard to identify sleep issues.

WHY DO CHILDREN HAVE SLEEP ISSUES?

Sleep associations – things we need in place to have a great night's sleep. For example some people need a certain pillow, or background noise playing or covering up even if it is very warm. Children also have sleep associations and if these can't be maintained throughout the night, they are likely to wake up. Common ones that we see include; needing a parent next to them to fall asleep, using a dummy, having a landing light on, the television/lullaby show playing. If a sleep association is not in place consistently throughout the night, your child is more likely to wake after a sleep cycle. For example, if a lullaby show turns off after 30 minutes, when your child partially awakes the sound and light conditions have changed which may trigger them to fully awaken. They will find it easier to nod off if you put the lullaby show back on. The ideal solution is to teach them to sleep without this playing so that they don't awaken during the night.

Lack of Routine. Is there a routine in place? Many families give up on routines because they believe they don't work. But did you know that doing the same thing at the same time each night helps to strengthen the circadian rhythm?

Anxiety and Worries. Separation anxiety can be a huge issue for little ones causing them to feel upset at bedtime. As children get older it may be that they worry about school, exams, or relationships. Sleep deprivation can also increase anxiety making it more difficult to nod off at night-time. Make sure you offer your child lots of reassurance, you could give them a special item to look after for you overnight, this may help them to understand that you are going to return. Photographs of family members in the bedroom may give some children comfort too. Youngsters may be fearful of sleep. Adults often use language around 'going to sleep' when discussing death. For example the pet hamster has 'gone to sleep'. Some children may find it helpful to have a visual timetable, showing a picture of them going to bed, one of them asleep and another of them waking up so that they can be reassured by the full cycle.

Food and Drink. Did you know your diet may impact on your night-time sleep? Sometimes we give our children a sugar/caffeine rush before bed without even realising it – hot chocolate and a biscuit is a terrible sleep combination!

Screen Time. Using screens such as televisions, game consoles and mobile phones is not advisable in the hour leading up to bedtime. The blue light that screens give off is similar to sunlight and sends a signal to the brain to stop producing melatonin. According to some research, using screens before you go to bed can double the length of time it takes you to fall asleep.

Room Temperature. If your child is too hot or too cold, it will impact on their sleep. We often tend to make the sleeping environment warmer than needed, thinking this might help with sleep when in fact a cooler room will aid better sleep. Ideally the room should be around 16-18 degrees.

Noise. Some children are particularly noise sensitive, it may be that the clicking on and off of the heating for example is enough to wake them. White noise can work well to mask out background noise. You can buy white noise machines that can be left on throughout the night.

Light Consider whether the lighting in the room changes during the night. If your child is used to going to sleep in complete darkness it may be that you need to invest in heavy lined curtains or blackout blinds if they begin to wake early in the summer

Pain/Medication. If your child is in pain it will impact on their sleep, and you should seek advice from a medical professional if you are concerned. It is also worth checking if any medication that they are taking may be impacting on their sleep.

Over Stimulating Bedrooms. There are some amazing bedrooms with disco lights, murals on the wall and piled high with toys – whilst these look fantastic, they are not ideal for a good night's sleep. Ideally the bedroom should be screen free, decorated in calming neutral colours and anything that may be more appealing than nodding off should be covered over or put away.

Hunger. This can be a cause of early waking so adding a supper time snack into the routine can be helpful for some children. Sleepy foods consist of almonds, bananas, oatmeal, cherries, sugar free cereal and turkey (we now have a genuine excuse for that post-Christmas dinner nap!) as well as anything dairy – it's a myth that cheese gives you nightmares! These foods either contain natural melatonin, or tryptophan, an amino acid that promotes sleep. Take care to avoid food and drink that contains caffeine -which is often found in hot chocolate!! Also check the sugar content of supper time snacks such as cereals and remember even fruit has natural sugars in so should be consumed in moderation.

SEND CHILDREN AND SLEEP

Some research suggests that youngsters with a diagnosis of Autism may not produce enough melatonin. There is also research suggesting that children with ADHD may release melatonin later at night. Medication used to treat ADHD can also have a negative impact on sleep if administered too late in the day. The good news is that youngsters with SEND can respond positively to using a behavioural approach to sleep and the strategies suggested below. These strategies should be tried before resorting to sleep medication. Bedtime resistance is a common issue with some youngsters finding it difficult to understand and follow a routine.

WAYS TO SUPPORT

Changing sleep habits is hard, it takes determination, and you must be absolutely consistent in your approach.

Sleep cannot be controlled!! . So, when you tell your child to 'just go to sleep' they literally can't! Think about it another way if I ordered you go to sleep right now and your reward would be £1million could you? It would be highly unlikely, even though you would love the money and you are probably feeling somewhat tired. The good news is that there are things that CAN be controlled that will help your child to fall asleep more easily.

Establish a good routine. The bedtime routine should begin an hour before 'sleep time'. Use a sleep diary to find the average time that your child falls to sleep and use that as a starting point. For example, if they fall to sleep at 9.30pm, begin the bedtime routine at 8.30pm with the aim being to get them into bed asleep for 9.30pm. Once they achieve this successfully for 3 nights, shift the whole routine forward by 15 minutes, so the routine begins at 8.15pm and sleep time becomes 9.15pm until you get to a bedtime that is suitable.

Remember to wake your child up at the same time each morning too, even on weekends!

- Turn off all screens in the hour before bed as the blue light reduces the sleepy hormone, melatonin
- Choose calming things to do, anything that uses fine motor skills can be very relaxing such as jigsaws, colouring in and craft activities
- 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
- Dim the lights and close the curtains during this time to help the body to produce melatonin
- Try to do the same thing at the same time each night this will help the body prepare for relaxation and sleep for example, pyjamas on, tooth brushing, toilet. If your child likes having a bath then schedule this in at least half an hour before 'sleep time'. This will increase their body temperature, it is the drop in body temperature following the bath that can help them to fall asleep more easily.

Exercise

Exercise can help your child to sleep but not if carried out too close to bedtime. Don't try to wear them out before bed as it can have the opposite effect, with the release of adrenaline and feel good endorphins! Exercise doesn't always mean sporting activities, playing outside or going for a walk can be helpful. Aim for your child to get some exercise each day but best avoided in the two to three hours before bed.

Breathing

In bed encourage your child to focus on their breath going in and out. Experience each breath and pay attention to how this makes them feel. You could encourage them to try the 7/11 breathing exercise. This is where you breathe in deeply whilst counting to 7, then breathe out slowly to the count of 11. Repeating this for a few minutes can help you feel calm and relaxed and can help you avoid being consumed by negative thoughts. This can also be a very useful technique that you can try if you feel stressed whilst dealing with your child during the night.

Making Bedtime Positive

Bedtime often becomes the part of the day that families dread. It is key that bedtime becomes positive again for you and your child. Here are some simple tips to help to promote a more enjoyable bedtime in your home:

- Point out the things that are going well during the routine and praise your child for them such as 'I love the way you put your toys away, well done!' Try to ignore the negatives where possible.
- Give rewards that motivate your child such as a sticker or a point on a reward chart. Never take these away or put negatives such as a sad face on the chart.
- Select activities to carry out in the routine that you know will keep your child engaged. You could think about their favourite TV characters and search for jigsaws or download colouring sheets online featuring them.
- Give your child a choice of 2 activities so that they feel they still have some control.
- End the day positively by sharing 5 happy things that have taken place.

OTHER RESOURCES

National Sleep helpline: 03303 530 541 available Thursday to Sunday 7pm to 9pm

<https://www.facebook.com/TheSleepCharity>

<https://x.com/TheSleepCharity>

<https://teensleephub.org.uk/> - for information on teen sleep and the specific issues for teenage