

Understanding some basics about sleep

All parents go through some difficulties in establishing good sleeping habits with their children.

The importance of sleep

Sleep is as important to our bodies as food. Sleep is particularly important for children.

During sleep:

- Growth hormones are released
- The immune system strengthens, helping your child's body to fight off illness
- The brain makes sense of the day's events
- Memory and concentration functions are increased
- Our bodies rest
- Emotional wellbeing is restored

What might affect your child's sleep?

All of the things that follow can affect sleep and you could look through your sleep diary to see if you can identify any of the following as being an issue for your child:

Routine — do you have a good bedtime routine for your child? Has their routine become unsettled lately because of an event like a family holiday or Christmas? Children like a clear structure that is as predictable as possible. This makes children feel safe. This is an unconscious need. They may not know this consciously.

- **A visual timetable about bedtime might help**
- **Be consistent as this helps to establish sleep patterns**
- **Rewarding your child**

It is important that you remain positive with your child at bedtime. Night time should be a relaxing and enjoyable experience. Children need praise at bedtime to encourage them to go to bed willingly and to go to sleep more easily.

Reward your child as soon as possible after they have displayed the behaviour you are looking for. For example, if getting into bed has been a battle, make sure that as soon as they are in bed they receive a reward. The reward should be given consistently each time they perform the appropriate behaviour until it is firmly established in their bedtime routine e.g. a brief conversation with teddy and a cuddle.

'Being positive and loving at bed time helped me and my child. Before my son probably thought that bedtime was a punishment'.

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Noise- Is there any noise inside or outside the home that may be disturbing your child? Some children with sensory issues, such as children with an autistic spectrum condition, can be particularly sensitive to noise - what may seem like a quiet sound to you can seem very loud to them.

Light — is the room dark enough? Melatonin is produced when the room is dark. You might consider buying black-out blinds to make the room darker.

An over stimulating bedroom - does your child get out of bed to play with toys? Are they playing computer games or watching TV before they go to bed? If so, your child may be over-stimulated by the bedroom environment.

Comfort — is their bed comfortable? Try lying on it during the day and seeing how it feels. Is your child wet or soiled? Could this be causing them to wake up?

Hunger — could your child be hungry? What time are they having their meal? Does their mealtime need to be later? Giving your child a snack mid-afternoon can help if you want to try moving their meal time to a little later in the day.

Room temperature — is your child too hot or too cold? Ideally the temperature in the bedroom should be between 16 C and 20 C. You can buy a thermometer to hang in your child's bedroom from nursery shops.

Bedding — is your child kicking the bedding off during the night and waking because they are cold? If so, you can consider using a double duvet tucked under the mattress of a single bed. You may also wish to consider whether your child would be more comfortable wearing a sleep suit. Some specialist clothing companies provide sleep suits that fasten at the rear to stop children taking them off during the night.

Lack of understanding about day and night - do they understand the difference between day and night? Sometimes children with additional needs require help to learn when it is day time and when it is time to sleep, particularly if they have a visual difficulty. Strategies to reinforce this are discussed in the next section.

Getting-up too early - if your child wakes up in the night do you treat it as a night awakening or as the start of the day? You should consider what a reasonable. Time to begin the day is, and if your child wakes before that time they should be returned back to their bed. This will help to strengthen their body clock.

Pain — is your child in pain? Could they be teething? Some children with physical disabilities cannot reposition themselves at night which can disrupt their sleep. If you think that your child may be in pain you should seek advice from medical professionals.

Medication — is your child on any medication that may be impacting on their sleep? Or do they have to be given medication during their sleep which may be disturbing them? Check with a medical practitioner if you are unsure.

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Self-settling

Many children do not learn to settle themselves. This means that they, rely on their parents to soothe them to sleep.

If your child has not learned to self-settle, they are likely to wake frequently during the night and they will need your help to get back to sleep. Each time your child comes to a partial waking they may wake up and then call out for you.

Some children rely on things like a bottle to settle themselves to sleep. If you have a child who is taking bottles throughout the night and is over 12 months, they are using the bottle for comfort rather than because they are hungry. It would be helpful if it would be helpful if they could be taught how to self-settle.

Tips to help children to self-settle

If you have stayed with your child until they go to sleep you need to gradually work on leaving them to settle alone. The best way to do this is by moving a short distance away from the bed each night. So, for example if you currently lie in bed with them until they fall asleep you should try sitting next to the bed for several nights. Then you should move your chair a short distance away from the bed and so on until you can reach the bedroom door and eventually leave the room. If your child wakes in the night you should repeat the routine that you carried out when they settled.

Once you have turned the lights out and said good night don't engage in conversation with your child. Reduce the amount of eye contact you give to them. You may find it useful to use one single phrase during the night such as 'it is night time, go to sleep'. If you start to have a conversation with your child it's as if they are being rewarded for staying awake.

Does your child go to sleep with the television on? If so, they are likely to wake up later on in the night **because the conditions that they fell asleep in have changed.**

It is important that the conditions are exactly the same throughout the night to avoid them waking up fully during a partial waking. So, it would be better to have the television off as they go to sleep.

A timetable used at bedtime can help the child to understand the order of events that are about to happen and to encourage their independence skills. You might begin with just a couple of pictures for younger children until they get the hang of it. The following table shows a visual timetable might look like, with the different parts of the routine being shown a pictures: