

Children's Community Nurse for
Learning Disability
Children with Disabilities Service



Sleep Solutions

Maintaining a Good Sleep Routine



There are a number of reasons why a child may have difficulty with their sleep, particularly with the current change in routine.

Keep a sleep diary if you are concerned about your child's sleep. This will help identify patterns in your child's sleep which can help you understand why they may be finding sleep more difficult.

Consider any events which have happened during the day, and what is happening on the lead up to bedtime.

Possible reasons for troubled sleep include:

- **An over-stimulating room** -does your child get out of bed to play with their toys? Distractions in a child's room can delay them from settling.
- **Noise** -are there any noises inside or outside the home that may be disturbing your child? Some children are particularly sensitive to noise and what may seem like a quiet sound to us may appear loud to them. Try masking sounds in your home with something like a white noise app can help.
- **Light**- is the room dark enough? Melatonin (our natural sleep hormone) is produced in the evening when the light starts to dim, which is why it is a good idea to put your child to sleep in a dark room. Black-out blinds can be purchased to help keep the room dark at bedtime.
- **Temperature**-is your child kicking the bedding off during the night and getting cold? If so, you could consider a sleep suit for your child or tucking a double duvet under a single mattress to stop it coming off during the night. Also consider is your child too hot?

Activities in the daytime and evening can affect sleep.

During the day:

- Try to get as much natural daylight as possible
- Avoid too much caffeine, this includes fizzy drinks, especially leading up to bedtime
- Try to find ways of dealing with worry. For some children/young people, this could be writing down their worries and popping them into a ‘worry box,’ so that they can forget about them until another time.
- Try to avoid daytime napping.

In the evening:

- Avoid any stimulating activities. TV, tablets and phones emit a blue light which inhibits our body’s production of melatonin (which helps us sleep)
- Don’t eat a large meal too close to bedtime. A light supper like toast, cereal and milk is good.
- Try to get schoolwork out of the way early in the day so it is not a worry in the evening time.

Ideas to help children settle to sleep at night

Many children/young people with additional needs struggle to settle themselves to sleep.

If you stay with your child until they go to sleep, you may need to distance yourself gradually to enable them to settle alone.

There is a strategy, called the ‘Disappearing Chair,’ which you can try. This works in stages; each stage could take a few days or weeks depending on your child, but it is important to do this gradually.

Disappearing Chair Stages

Stage 1: Parent sits on a chair beside the bed, maintaining physical contact (e.g. touch on arm or hand but no stroking) until child falls asleep.

Stage 2: Parent sits on a chair beside the bed, no physical contact.

Stage 3: Parent sits on a chair that has been moved further away from the bed and closer to the door.

Stage 4: Parent sits on a chair at the door, but inside the room.

Stage 5: Parent sits on a chair at the door, outside the room.

Stage 6: Child settles in room alone.

Once you have turned the lights out, and said goodnight, do not engage in conversation with your child.

Try using a 'broken record' phrase such as 'It's bedtime, go to sleep'.

Creating a bedtime routines

Routine is very important at bedtime. Children/young people with additional needs especially will respond positively to having structure at bedtime.

Once a routine has been established it is important to keep this consistent throughout the week even if your child is staying elsewhere for the night.

When creating a routine, it is helpful to decide what time, you would like your child to be in bed, and work back from this.

If bath-time is incorporated into this routine ideally it should occur at least half an hour before your child goes to sleep so their body temperature has time to regulate; a warm bath can increase body temperature and lead to difficulty sleeping.

Make a visual timetables: A visual timetable is a way of demonstrating to a child what they can expect to happen in the lead up to bedtime using pictures and symbols. You can take each part of the timetable away as it is complete

Explaining sleep: Some children can have difficulty understanding the concept of sleep and the need for it. A social story could be used to explain this.

Reward good sleep

It is important to remain positive with your child about bedtime as this will help them stay calm and positive about sleep.. Give your child praise at bedtime for what they are doing well and give consistent rewards for good sleep.

Other sleep tips:

- Create a relaxing environment where your child sleeps. No TV in room is highly recommended
- Have the same bedtime every night and wake up at the same time
- Ensure exercise is included in the child's play to help tire them out
- Introduce one hours quiet time before bed. In this time the TV, computer and loud music must be turned off and you choose activities that help unwind
- Add lavender oil to a bedtime bath to help relaxation
- Relaxation tapes and exercises may be helpful during quiet time.
- Try a gentle foot, hand or scalp massage. This may help your child unwind
- Using a heavy blanket, sleeping bag and or encouraging your child to hug a pillow can help to calm
- Put on soft, rhythmical music or have white noise (aps are available)
- Read a short story with your child
- Avoid drinks with caffeine and additives before bedtime. Instead have a drink of warm milk
- Make sure your child does not go to bed hungry, but try not to eat too close to bedtime