



My child has
TROUBLE SLEEPING

If children don't get enough sleep regularly, this can affect how they feel, how they cope at school and how well they can concentrate.



This toolkit can offer you some tips and advice on how to help your child get a good night's sleep.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Why do children and adolescents need sleep?

- 1 sleep promotes growth; growth hormone is mainly secreted during sleep
- 2 sleep helps the brain to concentrate; to make sense of the day's events and the things you learn at school
- 3 sleep is "detoxifying" and helps your brain develop and help you feel happy and stable



THINGS TO REMEMBER

Why do young people struggle with sleep?

I'm not tired! Sometimes your child might not know that they feel tired when it is bedtime. This can make it harder to get to sleep.

I'm hungry/thirsty! Sometimes your child might realise that they are hungry or thirsty or feel overfull, which can make it hard for them to sleep.

Where am I? Sometimes your child might be in a new place or bed, and feel a bit worried or scared about where they are.

I'm not comfy. If your child doesn't feel comfy and relaxed, it can be harder for them to fall asleep.

I'm worried/frightened. Sometimes children can get a bit scared, and when they feel scared, it can be very difficult to fall asleep.

I wet the bed. If your child wakes up to find they have wet the bed, it can be hard to get back to sleep again.



Top tips and strategies

Have a good bedtime routine

This might be teatime, quiet play, bath, story and then bed. It is good for you to try to ensure your child goes to bed around the same time each night, so that their brain is primed for sleep.

No electronic/stimulating games before bed

The content of screen time can lead to poorer sleep; if your child watches an exciting show or plays a stimulating game before bed, this can lead to adrenaline being released making it harder to fall asleep. It can potentially impact upon the maintenance of sleep too. The light that is emitted from such devices can also have an effect upon sleeping patterns; the bright light increases alertness making it harder to fall asleep and can interfere with our circadian rhythm, which helps maintain a natural sleeping pattern.

Reduce caffeine

Caffeine is not good for children and the effects of caffeine can last for several hours. It is important that caffeine isn't consumed during the evening and in the lead up to bedtime, as it increases adrenaline and blocks sleep inducing chemicals, which are necessary for good sleep. Remember that caffeine can be found in chocolate!

Good sleep environment

Your child's bedroom should be just for sleeping rather than other activities, such as watching TV or playing on the computer. Ensure your child's bedroom is a relaxing environment for optimal sleep. Focusing on the five senses can help:

Touch – make sure the bedroom environment is comfortable.

Sight – light can affect sleep, making a room darker before bedtime can help cue sleep.

Hear – quiet time before bed, without TV or loud noises, can help relaxation and promote good sleep.

Smell – calming smells (such as lavender) can help create a relaxed bedtime environment.

Taste – what we eat or drink before bed can impact sleep; having lighter dinners and avoiding caffeine can help promote better sleep. A hot milky drink before bed can also be helpful.

Get the correct amount of sleep for your age

Infants (4-11 months) should aim to get between 12-15 hours of sleep.

Toddlers (1-2 years) should aim to get between 11-14 hours of sleep.

Pre-schoolers (3-5 years) should aim to get between 10-13 hours of sleep.

School age children (6-13 years) should aim to get 9-11 hours of sleep.

Teenagers (14-17 years) should aim to get between 8-10 hours of sleep.

Having too much sleep can be as bad for your child as not having enough sleep.

Have regular exercise

It's important to do at least 60 minutes of exercise a day for children aged 5-18 years old – this could range from moderate activity, such as walking to school or playground games, to vigorous activity, such as running or gymnastics. Physical activity can help promote alertness in the day and can help promote good sleep. It is important that your child does not have vigorous exercise in the hour before bedtime.

Tips for managing nightmares

Teach coping skills – help your child to cope in a positive way by reminding them that they are being brave or helping them think about positive thoughts like “I can do this”. You could talk about how you deal with something that you are afraid of. You can also give them examples of coping role models like super heroes or by reading stories about children who are afraid and conquer their fears.

Have fun in the dark – make being in the dark fun. Play flashlight tag. Have a treasure hunt and search for things that glow in the dark.

Use your imagination and be creative – use your imagination to fight imaginary fears, like monsters. Many families have found “monster spray” to be a wonderful way to help a child cope with bedtime fears. Some children are comforted by having a pet nearby for night-time company (even a bedside fish tank may help). Whenever possible, have your child be actively involved in coming up with solutions to help them gain a sense of mastery and control.

Security object – help your child to feel safe by giving them a teddy or object that they can also have in bed with them. This can help your child feel more relaxed at bedtime and throughout the night.

Nightlight – no matter what your child seems to be afraid of, a night-light can help. Nightlights are fine as long as it does not prevent your child from falling asleep. Another thing to try is leaving the bedroom door open so that your child doesn't feel separated from the rest of the family.

Avoid scary television shows – keep your child away from TV shows, videos or stories that may add to their fears.

Being calm and relaxed – help your child to find ways to be calm and relaxed at bedtime by thinking about a relaxing scene, such as lying on the beach or watching a sunset. This will give something else to think about while lying in bed and help distract them from their fearful thoughts. You could also help them to take deep, slow breaths, maybe imagining blowing up a balloon and letting it deflate again.

Discuss your child's fears during the day – talk to your child about their fears during the day and how they can be less frightened at night. You can build your child's confidence during the day by giving them lots of praise for being brave and doing things on their own. If they feel secure during the day, this can help them feel more secure at night, too.

Set limits – whilst you are reassuring your child, it is important to set limits. This means helping your child when they are upset and saying "lets try a strategy where I will come back to check on you, you can do this". You can remind your child that they can cope with your help but they don't need to cry out and call for you continually.

Have them stay in their bed – don't encourage your child to get out of bed. Your child should stay in bed and find out for themselves that it really is safe so that they can learn to overcome their fears. It is much better for you to stay with them in their room than it is for your child to join you. If your child is too frightened to stay in their room alone, it is okay to occasionally stay with them until they fall asleep. Don't do this too frequently, or even two nights in a row, as your child may come to depend on your presence. If your child gets up in the middle of the night and comes into your room, it is better to take them right back and gently tuck them into bed.

Check on your child – if your child is anxious about you leaving, check on them frequently. It is better to check on them on a predictable schedule, every 5 or 10 minutes, so that your coming and reassuring them is not based on your child crying or calling out for you.

Star system – some children get reinforced for being scared at night by getting lots of attention for being afraid. If this is the case, switch the scenario. Tell your child how proud you are of them for being brave. Set up a star system so your child can earn stars for being brave and sleeping on their own. After earning a certain number of stars, they can turn them in for a treat, such as watching a favourite video, going to the park, or baking chocolate chip cookies.



WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

Working with your medical team

- 1 Speak to your healthcare team if you feel concerned about your child's sleep. They may be able to direct you to services where you can access guidance and support.
- 2 As you note from above, often problems around sleep are related to a child feeling worried or not having a good sleep routine.
- 3 Some teams in the hospital have a psychologist and/or counsellor as a member of their team, who can speak to patients and their families if they are struggling with sleep due to worry – ask a member of your healthcare team who knows you well, such as your clinical nurse specialist, if they can make a referral on your behalf.



WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

Useful resources

<https://sleepfoundation.org/ask-the-expert/my-child-has-trouble-sleeping>

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/Pages/sleep-problems-in-children.aspx>

The Little Elephant Who Wants to Fall Asleep: A New Way of Getting Children to Sleep Audiobook

Carl-Johan Forssén Ehrlin (Author), Rachel Bavidge (Narrator), Roy McMillan (Narrator), Penguin Books Ltd. (Publisher)

The Gentle Sleep Book: For calm babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers

Sarah Ockwell-Smith (Author)



These toolkits have been written by NHS clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists working for University Hospitals Bristol. They have been co-designed with service users and healthcare staff. These toolkits are only intended to provide general advice and information. Please discuss your individual needs with your doctor or specialist nurse. If you would like more information about psychology services please go to:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/>

We would like to thank patients and other healthcare staff for their contributions to this toolkit.

For access to other patient toolkits please go to the following address:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/resources/>

For this leaflet in large print, audio or PDF format, please email patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk

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