

# How to Help Your Child to Get a Good Night's Sleep



Having a good night's sleep will bring out the best in both you and your child.

By giving yourself the rest you deserve you will feel more able to give your child the positive attention they need and your child will feel more alert and happy; a child's behaviour can be greatly improved just by getting a good night's sleep.

Therefore getting into a good routine is so important for both you and your child.

This leaflet aims to help you to help your child develop good habits.

## **You may already be aware of some important principles which will help you modify not just sleep but all parts of your child's behaviour**

- Good behaviour needs to be learned.
- Although it is easier in the long run to start as you would like things to continue, this leaflet is aimed at helping you to change habits which may have been ongoing for some years.
- Children will learn that different behaviours lead to different reactions.
- If a particular behaviour is 'rewarded' in some way it is more likely to happen again. A reward can be anything that a child finds pleasant. Remember, your love, praise and attention are the most powerful rewards for good behaviour. Even the attention of a tired and irritable parent can be more rewarding than nothing.
- If a particular behaviour is "unrewarded" ie ignored, the child will begin to see it as pointless and that particular behaviour will tend to decrease.
- A child will find it easier to change a behaviour more quickly if the same thing happens every time the child does a particular thing, so it is really important that everyone who is involved in helping you look after your child responds in the same way. Sometimes this can be one of the most difficult parts.
- When trying to improve behaviour, try not to pick more than one thing at a time to work on. Everyone who cares for your child must agree (which behaviour is to be changed and how you will all respond each time this behaviour occurs) to ensure consistency. Work on changing this behaviour, and keep other parts of your child's life as normal as possible.

- When your child does something you do not like, remember to make your response as uninteresting as possible. At first you may need to explain what your child has done and why it is wrong, but once you have done this do not bargain or negotiate with your child. Use a short sentence and if you are going to give them time out lead them to the place. If they refuse to do the time out, calmly take them back to the place and keep doing this until they have finished the allocated time, do not argue or negotiate.
- Don't lock your child in his/her room; locking the door is scary, the goal is to teach your child to stay in bed, not punish or scare him/her.
- Be consistent, don't give up.
- Many children learn that if their parent is busy doing something in particular eg cooking dinner or talking on their phone, they can “play up” at this time. If you stop what you are doing and intervene you will stop your child's bad behaviour becoming a habit.
- Ignore any complaints or protests. Discussing or arguing will lead to a struggle with your child.
- Look for good behaviour in your child and reward this, even if you need to start with something simple at first!

# Sleep

Sleep and sleepiness is controlled by a number of factors; the most important is routine. If a child learns that everything winds down and becomes “boring” at a particular time the child will start to feel sleepy.

Therefore it is important that the child has a bedtime routine.

So the first thing to do is to decide what time bedtime should be, this will depend upon what time you need to be up in the morning.

Every child is different, and your child may need slightly more or less sleep, but here is a guide as to how much sleep your child will need each day/night:

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Newborn 0-3m    | 16-20 h sleeps for 1-4h then awake 1-2h |
| Infant 3-12m    | 14-18h                                  |
| Toddler 1-3yrs  | 12-14h, 1 nap per day                   |
| Child 3-6yrs    | 11-12h, no naps after 5yrs              |
| Child 6-12yrs   | 10h                                     |
| Teenager 12+yrs | 9-9.5h                                  |

The most important point is to make sure that your child receives enough sleep each night and the easiest way for your child to achieve this is for the child to have a consistent bedtime routine.

It is important that bedtime stays the same each night, even at weekends.

Bed time is the time your child goes to bed, some children may stay awake for some time after, but as long as you stick to the routine long enough your child will become predictably tired.

## Developing a Routine

All children are different. Some settle very quickly into a sleep routine, while others may take some time.

A bed time routine should last a maximum of 20-30minutes. It involves dimming the lights, changing into pyjamas, brushing teeth and relaxing, maybe reading a bedtime story or talking about their day with them. It might also be useful to give your child a particular soft toy/comfort blanket (which they take to bed with them) just before you start your routine. Reassure and reward your child with lots of positive attention for sticking to their routine.



Avoid anything that may stimulate your child – this is a time for winding down. It is important that your child understands that night time is when things become quieter and we go to sleep.

Likewise if your child refuses to start getting ready for bed it is important to stay calm, be firm and ensure that there are no distractions; that by going to sleep they are not missing out on anything, including TV/cuddles/last minute drink.

Some parents find it useful to have a phrase which they repeat to their child each night to signify that things have now changed, for example “good night, sleep tight, see you in the morning.” Repeat your bed time phrase to your child each night so that they know that this is the end of the day and the time to sleep.

## So you've started your bedtime routine and things aren't going to plan.....

Remember you are changing the rules, and few of us find this easy, even as adults. Of course your child is going to try and keep things the same, as they always were....

So here is a summary of some of the things you can expect to happen and how to deal with them:

### **Bedtime resistance/stalling**

- This typically involves asking for more TV, drinks, hugs and getting out of bed.
- Remember you are doing this because you love your child, and you want them to be at their best following a good night's sleep.
- Do not try to reason/bargain; your child needs to realize that they are not going to get any more attention, TV or anything else. You should also avoid touching/hugging your child as inadvertently you are rewarding bad behaviour. You need to be firm and calm and take them back to their bed, avoid eye contact and repeat your bedtime phrase.
- You will need to repeat this until your child stops getting up. Be calm, "boring" and consistent. The more consistent you are, the faster your child will learn.
- If you repeat this 10 times and then give in to your child, they will have learnt that as long as they continue 10 times you will give in. You've come this far; do you really want to have to increase the number of times you have to do this the following night?
- It may take a few weeks, but as long as you are consistent things will improve.
- If your child starts crying, try to avoid going back into the room immediately, (it may help to have an egg timer). If you really feel that you need to go in, then go in and calmly repeat your bedtime phrase, trying to avoid giving your child any more attention. Children need to learn to fall asleep themselves. If your child falls asleep being cuddled by you, when they wake they will wonder why you are not there

and be concerned. You love your child and they need to feel confident in that so that they can fall asleep on their own.

- If things really are difficult, a more gradual approach may be necessary, standing next to their bed/cot for 20 minutes each night while they settle for a few nights, then standing in the doorway for a few nights, then outside the door....
- Remember to reward your child the following day; give praise and a cuddle for being good, or a star chart might be helpful.

## **Night waking**

We all wake up at night, up to 5-6 times or more is normal. For most of us this is not a stressful event; we wake up, everything seems as it was when we fell asleep and we quickly fall back to sleep again, with no recollection of having woken up.

However if your child falls asleep with you cuddling them and then they wake to find you're no longer there or they are in a different bed, then they are likely to become anxious. When a child wakes regularly during the night it can be tiring for the whole family.

- Check to see if there is anything causing your child to be upset?
  - Are they unwell?
  - Are they too warm or too cold?
  - Do they have a wet or dirty nappy/bed?
- Try to let your child resettle themselves. If you need to intervene, resettle your child as you did at bedtime. You may need to resettle your child often at first but it is extremely important that they realise the right place to be asleep is in their own bed alone.
- If you think it is necessary, try a few sips of water (not milk, juice or anything else).
- Your child may wake again, and you may need to repeat this routine a number of times at first.

## Daytime naps

After the age of three, most children do not need to sleep during the day. If your child is sleeping during the day, try to cut out daytime naps otherwise your child will not be tired enough to go to sleep in the evening. For example you may need to give your child a snack whilst travelling in a car or take them out to the park in order to keep them awake.

## Nightmares

These are very common and tend to occur during the second half of the night. Your child will be anxious and wide-a-wake (unlike a night terror, when they will be confused and unable to recognise/communicate with you). Possible causes are anxiety or bullying. Try to talk through any concerns your child may have during the day. Avoid frightening stories or programs on TV. Encourage your child to talk about the dream but invent a happy ending.



## Night Terrors

Like nightmares these are very common, but unlike nightmares these tend to occur during the first part of the night and the child wakes suddenly in a confused state. Night terrors may be associated with sleepwalking, and the child will not remember having had a night terror or having sleepwalked the following day. You may find it useful to keep a sleep diary and wake your child just before the night terror/sleep walking is due. This changes the sleep cycle and can lead to resolution of sleep walking and night terrors but you may need to do this for around 1 month.



## Rewarding your child

Rewards are a good way of helping your child to do what you want him/her to do whether at bedtime or at other times of day. Rewards can be praise, cuddles, stickers, breakfast treats or activities with you such as visits to the park. You should discuss with your child the kind of rewards your child would like best but try and steer clear of sweets.

Your child *needs to know how to get the reward* and be rewarded *as soon as possible, every time* they behave as you want them to.

Look for something simple at first (for example going upstairs/into the bathroom) and praise them. After your child has managed this then the rewards can be more demanding (eg. staying in bed to sleep, staying in his/her bedroom in the morning until a certain time.)

Many children like star charts. You can find examples of these on the internet or make your own together. Each day your child achieves their goal they are given a star, once they have collected a certain number of stars they get a reward, which you will have both previously agreed upon. These charts work best if they are placed in the house where everyone can see them and where they can be shown to people who come to the house.

## Sleep Diary

Sleep diaries can be useful for monitoring your child's progress or for looking to see what interventions are working the best. They need to be kept for at least 2 weeks.

You may choose to keep a sleep diary to help you and your child if they are having night terrors or sleep walking so that you can wake your child just before they are likely to occur, or your doctor or health visitor may ask you to keep one to aid discussion and advice. You may choose to make one yourself, or download one from the internet.

Here is an example of what might be included:

|  | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thur | Fri | Sat | Sun |
|--|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Activities before bedtime                          |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
| Bedtime and time slept                             |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
| Times woke at night and for how long               |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
| Time woke in the morning and mood                  |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
| Daytime sleep, naps and other problems             |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
| Strategies tried                                   |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
| If helpful, score 1-5 (1=least and 5=most helpful) |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |

## General tips

You want your child to feel safe falling asleep by him/herself in his own bed.

Have a routine and stick to it.

Be consistent; children learn faster if the same thing happens every time.

Same routine, same action, same bedtime phrase. If necessary; “bore” your child to sleep.

Dim the lights so that your child knows it is time to sleep.

Have a bedtime phrase or a comfort toy/blanket.

Avoid night time drinks.

Avoid cuddling your child to sleep or putting him in your bed. By the age of 6 months, your child should be being put to bed whilst he/she is still awake but drowsy.

Avoid daytime naps in children over 3 years old

Reward good behaviour