

Healthy Sleep



What is sleep and why is it important?

Sleep is that period of time when the body and mind are naturally at rest – an altered state of consciousness takes over: our eyes shut, our muscles relax, our sensory connections to our surroundings diminish and our mind thinks less. Although it may seem that sleep is a single constant state, in fact sleep consists of various, but predictable stages and during each stage our body and brain respond in different ways.



Sleep is important because during its various phases vital physiological processes occur, which help us to be physically and mentally healthy and to function at our best when we are awake. Without enough sleep, we place ourselves at risk for poor thought-processing, generalised physical weakness and fatigue, and changes in mood, all of which can have a negative impact on our day-to-day functioning and social interactions.

How to overcome sleep challenges / promote healthy sleep habits in children with special needs

Ideally, for optimum health and function, school-aged children and teens should have at least 7 - 10 hours of sleep per day.¹ Lack of sleep or having difficulty sleeping in children, particularly those with physical, developmental and / or intellectual disabilities can have adverse effects on both the child and their families. Challenges to getting a good night's sleep can include:



- inability or resistance to fall asleep
- early morning waking
- waking through the night
- bed wetting
- night terrors or nightmares
- teeth grinding



Some factors that may interfere and affect the quality of sleep for children with special needs may include the following:

- seizures
- challenges with transitions
- anxiety
- medication side effects
- hyperactivity
- poor digestion causing nighttime discomfort
- poor positioning causing physical pain / discomfort

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[Click here for Good News video!](#)

GOOD NEWS:

Many sleep problems can be improved if not completely resolved.

Sunnybrook 

Strategies / tips to promote healthy sleep habits

Please note: The following strategies are not individualised and thus may or may not be appropriate for your child depending on their disability or medical condition. Please consult your child's primary health care practitioner if your child has ongoing sleep challenges and / or is demonstrating signs of physical pain or discomfort.

Structural / Routine

- **Be consistent with timing** - Make bedtime and wake-up time the same for both weekdays and weekends. The amount of sleep a child needs varies depending on age. Click [here](#) for recommended sleep times per age.
- **Establish a before-bedtime routine** - Have the same routine every night. To ease the transition, let your child know 7-10 minutes before the bedtime routine is to start.
- **Pace the bedtime routine** - Allow enough time to complete the routine *without* rushing. Use a [visual schedule](#) so your child can see the sequence of tasks and to help keep the pace and flow of the routine steady.

Sample Bedtime Checklist

- Put on pajamas
- Use the bathroom
- Wash hands
- Brush teeth
- Get a drink
- Read a book
- Get in bed
- Go to sleep

Sample Visual Bedtime Routine



- **Consider using [Social Stories](#) / [Social Scripts](#)** - These tools can lessen your child's anxiety with sleep and help them understand expected bedtime behaviour.
- **Keep a [Sleep Diary](#)** - Tracking unusual patterns in your child's sleep can help identify where changes could be made to their routine to improve their sleep.

Environmental

- **Calm surroundings** - Ensure the bedroom is a calm, restful setting. Avoid stimulating features such as bright colours and lots of toys.
- **Dim lighting** - Make the room dark enough to encourage sleep. Turn off any overhead lighting or digital devices emitting blue light (e.g. clock, iPad). If your child has fear of the dark, use a single night light or leave their door slightly open for the hallway light to come in.
- **No active use of digital devices** - All screens in the bedroom should be covered or turned off.
- **Comfort** - Ensure the bed, bedding and sleepwear are comfortable. Consider the season and adjust nightwear and bedding to suit the temperature.
- **Room temperature** - The ideal sleeping temperature is approximately 16-18 °C²; ask your child what feels comfortable.



Consider opening the window slightly to allow fresh air to circulate through the room.



Sensory

- **Calm / restful visual input** - Make the room completely dark or have soft lighting, such as a night light, lava lamp, or lighted fish tank.
- **Relaxing scents** - Use calming essential oils (e.g. lavender, vanilla) either in a diffuser, or place 1-2 drops on wrists, back of neck, or chest. Scented bath salts can also be added to a warm bath.
- **Comforting, soothing tactile input** - Provide a favorite stuffed toy, a heated bean bag pillow or [Warmie](#), a preferred blanket and / or a pillow. Consider the textures your child likes (e.g. soft, coarse, light, heavy, silky etc.)
- **Deep touch pressure** - For those who seek hugs or a “heavy” sensation on their body, sleeping under a heavy quilt or bedding tucked snugly around them can be calming and provide a sense of security.
- **Oral motor input** – Provide a soother or safe chew toy to suck on in bed. Consult a dentist for a mouth guard if your child grinds their teeth.
- **Gentle massage before bed** - Apply lotion slowly and rhythmically on arms legs, torso, feet and hands; this combines sensory inputs of touch, deep pressure and smell.
- **Gentle rhythmic movement** - Rocking your child can be relaxing and calming.
- **Lulling sounds** - Use gentle sounds such as soft music, (e.g. a free MP3 [Ultimate Calm for Kids](#)), white or ambient noise (e.g. fan, white noise machine), or a story read in a calm voice when your child is in bed and the lights are dim. There are many [digital device apps](#) available geared to help children fall sleep.



Physical

- **Fresh air and physical activity** - Outdoor activity during the day promotes nighttime sleep. Consider having a walk with your child outside in the afternoon or going to the playground or park.
- **Slow down before bed** - Minimize vigorous physical activity / play before and during the bedtime routine.
- **Hunger and thirst** - Make sure your child is not hungry or thirsty before going to bed. If a snack is part of their bedtime routine, make it a light snack (e.g. fruit or crackers; avoid food and drinks with caffeine and / or sugar).
- **Consider positioning in bed for optimum comfort and breathing** - Determine your child’s preferred sleeping position for comfort and clear airways. Use pillows to help positioning and alignment. If your child has a physical disability, you may want to consult your child’s physio-therapist or occupational therapist for recommendations regarding their optimum position for sleep.
- **Medication** - If your child takes medication, consult the prescribing physician as to potential side effects that may influence sleep patterns.
- **Dietary Supplements** - You may want to ask your pediatrician about the option of dietary supplements to help regulate sleep-wake cycles.
- **Sleep Diary** - Use a sleep diary to provide your paediatrician with details of your child’s bedtime routine, responses to the routine and sleep patterns.



How to start “sleep training” with your child

1. Determine a bedtime and wake-up time for your child. To facilitate your child’s compliance, it may be helpful to have them determine these scheduled bed- and wake-times with you, by offering them two choices of time for each. From the choices offered, your child can pick one time for bedtime and one time for wake-up time.
2. Create a [social script](#) for a new bedtime routine and read it to your child before, or when introducing, the routine.
3. Create a [visual schedule](#) for the bedtime routine. Initially, assist your child in following the visual schedule, pointing out each step in the routine, and then gradually reduce your support over time to help your child become independent.
4. Consider exploring [alarm clocks](#) or [mobile apps](#) to help your child sleep longer by giving them a visual indicator whether it is time to get up or time to stay in bed.
5. The following are a few tips for resolving some common issues that you may encounter while “training” your child to stay in bed and sleep longer at night:
 - ✓ ***If your child cries*** - Speak calmly, reassure your child they are fine and that it is time to go to sleep. Make your visit brief and then leave the room. If your child continues to cry, space the time between your visits to the bedroom. When you are in the room, calmly say a few reassuring phrases, to settle your child and then leave the room.
 - ✓ ***If your child starts developing a habit of getting out of bed*** - Take your child back to bed and tell them that, if they get out of bed again, the door will be closed. If your child stays in bed, the door will remain open.
6. Praise and reward your child when they stay in bed to reinforce their appropriate bedtime behavior. Rewards could include stickers, breakfast treats, small toys, or other special prizes.



References:

1. In Brief: Your Guide to Healthy Sleep - NHLBI Health Information Center, NIH Publication No. 11-5800. Originally printed April 2006. Revised September 2011 <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/files/docs/public/sleep/healthysleepfs.pdf>
2. Perfect Sleep Environment. Sleep Council: Wake-up to Sleep <https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-advice/perfect-sleep-environment/>
3. Encouraging Healthy Sleep Tip Sheet – Surrey Place Centre. April 2020. <https://www.surreyplace.ca/resources-publications/family-caregiver-support/learning-at-home/encouraging-healthy-sleep/>
4. Getting Your Child to Go to Bed & Stay There <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/14304-getting-your-child-to-go-to-bed--stay-there>
5. Healthy Sleep Habits: How Many Hours Does Your Child Need? <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/sleep/Pages/Healthy-Sleep-Habits-How-Many-Hours-Does-Your-Child-Need.aspx>

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