

ACORN EDUCATION AND CARE

Sleep Difficulties in Children and Adolescents

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Why Children Need Sleep

Studies have shown that children benefit from an adequate amount of sleep on a regular basis. For example, they find it easier to stay alert during the day, they learn and remember things better and they are also better at managing their moods and dealing with irritations. Children grow in their sleep and sleep helps their body to get rid of toxins and boost their ability to fight infections, illness and stress. Children aged 5 need about 11 hours sleep. At around 10, they benefit from 9 and a half – 10 hours sleep and children aged 14 and over need around 9 hours sleep.



Sleep Difficulties

The most common problem in toddlers and young children is sleeplessness and is often related to them being fearful about being left alone at night. Older children and adolescents may find it hard to sleep when they are worried, or have consumed something which causes their bodies to be alert, like too much tea, coffee or energy drinks. In addition it is counter-productive to have screen time just prior to going to bed. Going to sleep very late, watching exciting films or using gadgets before bed can all have a negative effect on sleep.

Children who have suffered trauma or loss in the past; whose memories of past trauma are triggered; who are at the receiving end of abuse or neglect; or who observe abuse in their environment, may understandably find it difficult to switch off at night. They may be overwhelmed by upsetting memories or may fear being attacked when they are asleep as they can no longer be vigilant or pick up on any imminent danger.

If their sleep difficulties continue, children may find that they cannot go to sleep at an earlier

time as their body's circadian rhythm has become unsettled. The circadian rhythm is basically our 24-hour internal body clock, which is running in the background of our brain and cycles between sleepiness and alertness at regular intervals. It's also known as your sleep/wake cycle. Irregular sleep patterns can change our circadian rhythm and also the levels of melatonin, which signal your brain to sleep.

When children don't get enough sleep, they will find it difficult to get up in the morning and seem drowsy and increasingly irritable during the day. As a consequence their learning and performance suffers. They may eat more in order to increase their energy levels, and may gain weight as a result. Other people may think they are being lazy or awkward, which can cause arguments during the day and relationships with adults, siblings and peers may suffer as a result.

Sleep difficulties are very common and can improve over time. Persistent sleep difficulties need to be taken seriously as this may indicate the child has an underlying psychological problem or even a physical disorder that needs to be dealt with. It may also be that their sleep environment is not helping them to settle and needs to be changed.

General Strategies that can help to address sleep difficulties

When sleep difficulties occur, the body clock has been upset and needs to be re-set. This is best achieved by regulating and limiting the physical and emotional stimulation your child has before bedtime and sticking to a consistent, regular sleep routine.

1. Limit certain meals and drinks before bedtime

Generally, it is advisable to avoid your child having a big meal just before bedtime, as this tends to keep the body busy or makes lying in bed uncomfortable. In particular meals that are high in carbohydrates seem linked to poor sleep. Carbohydrates are the body's main source of energy and include: sugars, starches and fibres found in fruits, grains, vegetables and milk products.

Children should also avoid drinking tea, coffee or drinks with a high sugar content after 3pm as this will arouse their body rather than help it relax. It's worth knowing that caffeine can stay elevated in your blood for 6–8 hours, so it's best to avoid such drinks well in advance of bedtime. Consider giving your child warm milk

as part of their bedtime routine, as this tends to aid relaxation.

2. Limit screen time before bed time

You need to decide at what time screen time is stopped and how this will be achieved. Ideally this will be agreed with your child. Try giving them a 5 minute and 1 minute reminder that time is nearly up, so that they can finish what they are doing and have time to wind down before bed.

Research has proven that using electronic devices before bedtime, including the tv, can be physiologically and psychologically stimulating (and upsetting) in ways that can adversely affect sleep. This is largely due to the short-wavelength, artificial blue light that is emitted by these devices. The more electronic devices a child uses in the evening, the harder it is to fall asleep or stay asleep. In addition these gadgets encourage them to stay alert, which delays their mind and body getting ready to sleep and compromises the amount of beneficial, restorative sleep they get.



Try setting a gadgets-curfew a minimum of one hour before bed. The longer before bedtime, the better, but it also needs to be realistic.

3. Problem-free talk at bedtime

Furthermore, some children like to talk through their day as well as any difficulties they may have had at bed time. If your child tends to do this, find another time before the bed time routine that they know is reliably set aside for them to talk and avoid doing this at bedtime because it usually stimulates the brain. If they do mention issues, or things 'they should not forget' at settling time, then encourage them to write these down in a few words at that point in time, to reassure them they (and you) will not forget and attend to them the next day.

4. Create a sleep-positive bedroom environment

It is also important to create a sleep-positive bedroom environment. Therefore, avoid bright lights, loud noises, hot room temperatures etc, as your child's senses need to calm down. This can also be achieved by: (1) blocking all noise, for example by using earplugs, (2) half open a window so their room is slightly cold (research has shown it is best to sleep in a colder room,

rather than in a room that is warm and has the radiator turned on) (3) using a few droplets of essential lavender or jasmine oil at the corner of their pillow, or in a diffuser or body spray. This may help promote sleep as these oils appear to have sleep promoting qualities.

In addition it will be helpful for your child not to play in their bed, as this gives 'the wrong' signal to the brain because it encourages them to remain active.

5. 'Bedtime fading' may help some adolescents

If there is more than 30 minutes between bedtime and sleep onset, 'bedtime fading' may be an effective strategy. It means temporarily setting the bedtime to when your child easily falls asleep (e.g. 11.30 pm). Bedtime is then moved earlier by approximately 15 minutes every few nights to the desired bedtime (e.g. 9.30 pm), allowing their body clock to gradually re-adjust. This strategy needs to be used in conjunction with the following:

- Stick to a regular wake up time
- Exercise and daylight exposure in the early morning



Moderate physical activity early in the morning, and increased daylight exposure, are considered beneficial to healthy sleep, by boosting the production of serotonin (the mood stabiliser) in the brain and decreasing levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.

- Avoid daytime naps

A Sleep Routine to Help Regulate the Body and Mind and Address Sleep Difficulties

When their body clock needs to be re-set, this is best achieved by having a consistent, relaxing sleep routine that is used before your child is too tired to go to bed. Some children cope with the sleep routine being varied during weekends and holidays, yet others are less flexible and need to have the same bedtime routine every night. The following steps may help:

Step 1: Decide what time your child should be in their bedroom to settle, and what time the lights need to go out. Advise your child in advance of the times and remind them about it 5 minutes in advance, so they can finish what they were doing and wind down before bedtime.

Step 2: Having quiet time before going to bed will help your child wind down. This may include a variety of activities that are listed below:

Warm baths and showers are thought beneficial to help induce sleep. The warmth and sound of running water soothes the senses. Use lavender or jasmine scented bath foam or bath oils, as they are considered to aid relaxation and induce sleep.



Reading, doodling, or doing a Wordsearch or Seduko may help distract their minds from everyday life worries, as long as these activities don't excite or frustrate the child.

Reading bedtime stories may help, as your child will focus on the tone and rhythm of your voice and will find this soothing, even when they are older and you think they may not 'need' this anymore.

Step 3: With the lights off, when trying to go to sleep, try either of these specific strategies:

The 4-7-8 breathing method, which helps to focus the mind (on breathing) and develop a relaxed breathing pattern. Follow these guidelines (initially with your help, later alone):

1. Ask your child to place the tip of their tongue behind their upper front teeth;
2. Then ask them to exhale through their mouth while making a 'woosh' sound;
3. They close their mouths and inhale through their nose, while counting slowly up to 4.
4. Hold their breath and count to 7
5. Finally, they exhale slowly through their mouths, making the 'woosh' sound while counting up to 8.
6. Repeat this cycle at least 3 more times.

Visualise a place that calms. Picturing and concentrating on an environment that makes them feel peaceful and relaxed can take your child's mind away from worries. This maybe a real place or an imaginary place. Encourage them to use all their senses while imagining this scene, by

asking in turn: “what do you see, hear, taste, and feel on your skin?”

Practise mindfulness, yoga or meditation.

There are various apps, cd’s and (audio) books to consider. These techniques tend to combine guided relaxation instructions with breathing and distraction techniques, which help focus the mind, shut out everyday life troubles and slow mind-and-body down.

Listening to soothing music at bedtime can significantly improve quality of sleep.

Step 4: When children are unable to settle after bedtime, or wake up during the night, keep your response brief by saying as little as possible and use a calm, neutral voice when talking. This will reassure them and not unwittingly make them more alert, anxious or irritable as a result of you raising your voice or debating with them why they should go to sleep. That will prolong the time they need to calm and settle.

Specific Problems at Night

• Nightmares

Most children and adults suffer from occasional nightmares, which tend to be informed by anxiety. Children will usually remember their dream and may need to be comforted so that they can get back to sleep. Nightmares can also be caused by worry, bullying and abuse of any kind, or be as a result of trauma that may have been triggered earlier during the day. It can be helpful to encourage the child to talk to you about the dream, or draw a picture of it. This will help you find out what support or help they may need.

• Night terrors and sleepwalking

When these happen, the child seems to be awake and behaves in a disoriented, confused way. In fact, they are still asleep and they are not aware of what is happening around them. When children suffer night terrors, they may not be able to recognise you and they will be unable to communicate. It is therefore difficult to reassure them. Luckily children tend not to remember these incidents in the morning, but it may have been traumatic for you. These difficulties may be hereditary and they will

grow out of it eventually. Sleepwalking is a similar problem, and the main thing you can do is ensure they don’t hurt themselves or others.

Conclusion

We help to support the parents/carers of children and young people placed at Acorn Education and Care with addressing any difficulties associated with sleep, using some of the strategies outlined in this help sheet. We then implement techniques to ensure the strategies are successful for example by developing positive behavior support plans and utilising reward charts.

If the sleep difficulties persist, a child may need a formal assessment by Specialist Paediatricians or Psychiatrists. If you already have access to these professionals then please ask them for advice otherwise consult your GP.

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