

Guide to supporting sleep

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Why is sleep important?

Experts acknowledge that sleep plays a significant role in brain development, and it is therefore important for children to get enough sleep as their bodies grow and mature. Sleep is crucial for teenagers - it is while they are snoozing at night that they release a hormone that is essential for the growth spurt during puberty. As well as the role it plays in brain development, sleep also plays an important role in our brain's day-to-day ability to function. Lack of sleep makes it much harder for us to concentrate, and we become forgetful, irritable and prone to being clumsy and making mistakes.



Scientific evidence shows that the right amount of nighttime sleep is just as important for children's development as healthy eating and regular exercise. Sleep is so crucial to our wellbeing, and so precious when our children are young. This is why it has become such an area of debate among experts. It is also a topic which, as psychologists, we often ask questions about.

Sleep is important for the body and the mind:

- ◇ *It consolidates learning*
- ◇ *It improves concentration and attention*
- ◇ *It helps improve problem solving*
- ◇ *It enables growth; muscles, bones and skin*

A child/ young person who does not sleep well can affect the whole family. It has been said that, if children have one hour less sleep than they need, it can set them back by a year in terms of the brain function, meaning they act a year younger (Markham, 2014)

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Signs we are not getting enough sleep

- ◇ Increase in tantrums and grumpy behaviour
- ◇ Easily distracted, day-dreaming behaviour
- ◇ Clumsy and accident prone
- ◇ Increase in colds and bugs
- ◇ Having to be woken up in the morning: if you wake your child in the morning, they are not getting enough sleep. If you have to use an alarm, you are not either. Kids depend on grown ups to start the day with their "full cup". It is not easy to stay patient when you are exhausted.

 [Read How to be a positive role model for more information](#)

Children do not have sleep problems, we as a society have created expectations and demands of parenting that are not in harmony with a child's biological or psychological needs. We then struggle when children don't sleep as we "need" them to. - Sarah Ockwell-Smith, 2014

The truth about babies and toddlers self-soothing: is it well researched that sustained, uncomforted crying causes increased heart rate and blood pressure, reduced oxygen and increased cortisol, adrenaline and other stress hormones. [Watch](#)



We all move through different levels of sleep and often wake during the night, sometimes so briefly we do not remember it. There are 5 stages of sleep in one sleep cycle. Each cycle takes approx. 90 minutes. The 5th stage is known as REM sleep and is when the brain is most active and when we dream. Deep sleep is when our brain makes memories and processes learning.



Challenges with Sleep

All children need to be taught how to self-soothe in order to drift off. Some children have difficulty going to sleep or staying asleep. Other children might have nightmares, night terrors or sleepwalk.

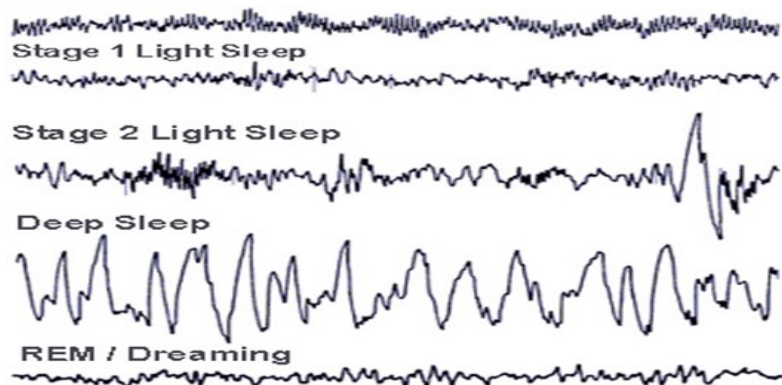
Nightmares: Are common and usually begin between 18 months and 3 years. What you can try?:

- ◇ Provide reassurance and comfort
- ◇ Talk to your child about their nightmare
- ◇ Encourage them to draw and make up a story about their nightmare but with a happy ending

If difficulties persist and you are worried, contact your GP or Health Visitor.

Did you know that babies experience genuine fear when they are left to fall asleep alone due to stone-age instincts which tell them that tigers might eat them. We need to respond to their cues to develop our connected relationships with them.

Stages of sleep



General sleep and bedtime tips

All children are different and it is important to remember that problems with sleep are common. Things you can try:

- ◇ Encourage activity and fresh air during the day.
- ◇ Ensure the bedroom is cool, dark and quiet.
- ◇ Consider a light snack before bed, foods containing tryptophan i.e. warm milk are helpful. [Read about more sleep inducing foods here.](#)
- ◇ Avoid fizzy juice before bed and other drinks/foods containing caffeine.
- ◇ Avoid screens, i.e. TV, tablets etc. for at least 1 hour before bed as they depress melatonin the sleep hormone.
- ◇ Aim for bedtime to be at the same time every night.
- ◇ Have a bedtime routine, i.e. bath, story, bed, or share some quiet time.
- ◇ Allow a comforter i.e. favourite teddy for as long as your child would like.

How much sleep does my primary school child need?

Sleep requirements differ, but in general a younger child needs more sleep. Between the ages of 5 and 11, your child will need 10-12 hours a night.

A bedtime routine is the best way to ensure that your child gets enough sleep. Devise a routine that lasts 30-40 minutes, and includes a bath and the chance to read a story (or stories) together. Try not to change your routine at all during the week. If you want your child to have a slightly later bedtime at weekends, then only change it by maybe an hour.

Bedtime is a chance to spend some quality time together, and if it is a time both you and your child enjoy, your son/ daughter will settle down and drop off to sleep more easily.



How much sleep does my secondary school child need? Sleep tips for teens

Between the ages of 11 and 18, teens need 8.5-10 hours of sleep a night but many have trouble sleeping.


It can be difficult to encourage older children to keep to a regular bedtime, but it's important to try. Experts have linked too little sleep to problems with emotions, behaviour, concentration and achievement at school. It can also contribute to weight gain by inhibiting appetite-controlling hormones and affects puberty. Older children often don't realise they're not getting enough sleep. Talk to your them - if they are finding it difficult to get up in the morning, suggest earlier nights.

A routine can be hard to enforce, but bedtime can be an opportunity for quality time, just like when they were at primary school. Why not make it a regular habit to have a brief end of day chat with them? Top tips for teens include:

- ◆ **Be active during the day**— for at least 60 minutes, not too close to bedtime
- ◆ **Avoid alcohol and drugs**—these disrupt sleep and increase chance of waking
- ◆ **Say goodnight to devices**—an hour or more before bed, nothing says “wake-up” like the buzz of a text or ping of an IM
- ◆ **Keep a sleep routine**—to help body expect sleep, similar time, relaxing activities/ routines to unwind—reading, music, pets, journaling, anything which relaxes them
- ◆ **Expect a good nights sleep**—instead of worrying that you won't sleep, remind yourself that you can to reduce stress which causes insomnia. Try yoga/ breathing exercises

Adolescence is often thought about as a challenging time. However, there *are* things we can do to give the best chance of a smooth and positive ride. It is just a matter of having the right knowledge, attitude and strategies.

Discover more at

[Positively Teenage by Nicola Morgan](#) 

Bedtime as an opportunity for connection/ relationship development

- ◆ Use a chart to help them transition through the routine and avoid you having to nag
- ◆ Divide your time between kids (where possible) so they each get the connection they need
- ◆ Focus on bedtime and keep it moving along rather than getting distracted by your phone
- ◆ Do whatever you need to stay calm, losing tempers triggers more separation anxiety
- ◆ Give each child ten minutes of private quality time after lights out for a snuggle/check-in

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Pause for thought....



Sarah Ockwell-Smith (2015) has devised a **BEDTIME** acronym which covers what she feels are the seven most important points to think about and implement why trying to encourage children to sleep more easily. She emphasises that not all seven will appeal to you and work for your family, but there will be something that will. The importance of giving these gentle changes time to work, with 6 weeks being noted as a realistic time, within which to expect changes. Patience, consistency and commitment is required, rather than trying something once and thinking 'Oh, that doesn't work'.

B: Bed-sharing and co-sleeping—science tells us that sharing a bed with babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers does not cause any psychological damage when they are older and she describes all of the benefits in her book.

E: Expectations—it is important to have realistic expectations of children's sleep (understand the normal range of sleeping patterns at specific ages) and also to help them form expectations around helpful bedtime routines.

D: Diet—breastfed and formula-fed babies do sleep differently, babies do need night feeds, what your child is eating can impact on their sleep (allergies, intolerances, food that prevent and help sleep).

T: Transitional objects—comfort objects (blankies, teddies) that allow children to make the transition to independence from their caregiver so they are separate whilst still holding a piece of that trusted adult. These should be chosen by the child and it is perfectly normal, and very common, for them to be used through childhood.

I: IT and screen time—affect sleep in two ways by impacting production of melatonin and stimulating the brain.

M: Me-time—to look after children you need to look after yourself (eat well, sleep, give yourself treats).

E: Environment—a calming environment is vital to sleep (lighting, smells, sounds).

Further information and resources



[NHS sleep problems in young children](#)

[NHS sleep tips for teenagers](#)

[Sleep Scotland](#)

[Sleep for Kids: explanations, games & fun for kids](#)

[Parentclub: ideas to get toddler to sleep](#)

[Parentclub: general sleeping tips](#)

[Sleep Foundation: for all age groups & adults](#)

[Young minds teenage sleep problems](#)

[SCOPE: advice for families of children with ASN](#)

[Sarah Ockwell-Smith blog, psychologist/ homeopath](#)



[Nicola Morgan talks about teenage well-being](#)

[Why does my child wake up at night? Craig Canapari](#)

[BBC Bitesize: How to get your child's bedtime routine right, expert sleep consultant Mandy Gurney](#)

[Starting a bedtime routine if your child has never had one](#)



[Relax kids downloads for restful sleep & night terrors](#)

The Gentle Sleep Book by Sarah Ockwell-Smith (2015) - **important messages for all ages/ families in chapters 1-6**

Calm parents, happy kids by Dr Laura Markham (2014)

[Contact a Family: guide to helping children with ASN sleep](#)

Blame my brain: the amazing teenage brain revealed by Nicola Morgan (2007)

The Awesome Power of Sleep by Nicola Morgan (coming Feb 2021)