

Sleep

Sleep is hugely important to keep us healthy both physically and mentally. Getting the right amount of sleep can help our concentration, attention, behaviour, learning and memory. Bedtime can be stressful, particularly if it is difficult to 'switch off' the body and mind from the events of the day.

Sensory processing differences may contribute to our ability to calm down at the end of the day. This handout provides some ideas and advice about helping create a calm bedtime. The following ideas are designed to help address challenges children may face when preparing for bed. When using them, consider your child's age, any potential risks, and their sensory preferences. Reflect on how to adapt these strategies to best support your child to engage well in bedtime activities.

There are many other factors that impact sleep from limited awareness of night/day to anxiety or medical issues. You may want to try a sleep diary to see if there are any patterns to your child's sleep and to help identify what strategies may help. For more advice, and for a template sleep diary, see The Sleep Charity website: [Sleep Diary For Kids - The Sleep Charity](https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/sleep-diary-for-kids/) (<https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/sleep-diary-for-kids/>).

Please contact your GP if your child has persistent difficulties with sleep which are impacting their day-to-day functioning, or you are struggling to cope with their sleep pattern.

Area of difficulty	Strategy	Tick when strategy has been tried and add comments
Child has difficulty relaxing before bedtime.	Where possible, avoid the use of screens before your child goes to sleep. If not, use "nighttime" light filters on devices.	
	For children who prefer sleeping in the dark, trial black out blinds to reduce visual input.	
	For children that prefer to have some light, trial a night light that can be easily operated or is on a timer. Avoid lights that are particularly harsh or bright. Consider the use of lights which gently change colour or move to give them something to focus on and regulate them as they fall asleep.	
	Limit visual distractions by storing toys/objects in containers and cupboards. Consider if patterns on walls/bedding are too "busy" and over stimulating and if possible, use neutral colours on walls. One idea may be to create a den/tent over the child's bed.	
	Support your child to prepare for bedtime with visual supports/ countdowns. See Worksheet B-Attention and Focus in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Pre-School Resource Pack' on our website. Alternatively, Worksheet D-Attention and Focus in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Motor Skills Resource Pack' on our website.	

	Avoid sugary drinks and snacks before bedtime. Consider the use of warm decaffeinated drinks instead.	
	Consider the use of scents that are particularly relaxing in the bedroom, these could be used on the pillow or on nightwear or soft toys/comforters. Also consider the scent of shower/bath gels used for self-care at bedtime.	
	Try to keep any noises predictable and rhythmical. Use a gentle, calm voice when talking or reading a story. Model calm behaviours by using calm voice and calm, predictable actions at bedtime.	
	Some children respond well to a music playlist to initiate bedtime routine. Your child may like music which may not feel calming to you but if it is predictable and rhythmical as it is easier for the brain to process. If it is to be turned off prior to sleep, have a clear ending to the music to prevent your child becoming dysregulated.	
	Some children like white noise, calming music or audiobooks on throughout the night to block out the 'silence'.	
	Consider your child's sensory preferences with material touching their skin. Explore different bedding options such as brushed cotton, silk satin, bamboo. Explore different pyjama materials such as fleece or cotton.	
	Some children may feel more grounded and secure with tighter fitting clothing as it helps increase their awareness of wear their body is in space. Some children may prefer looser fitting pyjamas. Explore these options with your child.	
	Firm, deep pressure which is predictable can be grounding for some children. Massage stories provide a structured interaction before bedtime examples of these can be found in the book 'Once Upon a Touch – Story Massage for Children' by Mary Atkinson and Sandra Hooper.	
	Wearing tight pyjama's or sleeping under thick duvets may be easier for some children who find it hard to process tactile sensations on their skin.	
	Make sure that the room temperature is right for your child and well ventilated. A cooler room is generally better for sleep so consider the heating, use of fans.	
	The temperature inside the bed can then be adjusted with clothing and bedding that is breathable, heated wheat bags, pre-warming nightwear or using thicker blankets as tolerated.	

	Trial breathing/grounding exercises before bedtime to help your child to organise how they are feeling, e.g. a body scan, mindfulness or breathing exercise. There are mindfulness/sleep apps available that have guided programmes to follow.	
	Consider strategies to support your child with any anxieties about what has happened today or what is to come tomorrow e.g. worry monster where thoughts can be written and eaten by the monster or creating 'talk time' to give a safe space to sharing worries.	
	Avoid large rough and tumble movements in bedtime routines. Rhythmical, gentle rocking motions can be soothing to the brain such as sitting in a rocking chair for stories.	
	Place the mattress on the floor or consider a floor level bed, or placement of bed near to a wall for security, particularly if your child is afraid of heights.	
	Offer heavy work or deep pressure activities as part of the wind down before bed e.g. snuggle into large pile of cushions or under blankets with a calming activity such as reading, colouring. Deep pressure activities with predictable movements, can be calming, such as back rubs, rub down with a towel, massage, firm hugs.	
	Equipment such as a squeeze canoe can offer intense pressure which the child may find calming. Inflatable Laybags or Loungers can provide a similar experience. Follow manufacture guidelines and supervise your child at all times when in use.	
	Drinking through a straw or having chewy crunchy snack can be calming before bed.	
	Some children may like their bed pushed against the wall so they can push against the wall. Sleeping bags or thicker blankets can also feel containing/secure and provide something to push against.	
	Avoid stressful tasks close to bedtime routine- these will be different for each child but could include tasks usually associated with bedtime routine teeth brushing / bathtime.	
Child has difficulty following a bedtime routine.	Keep bedtime routine as predictable as possible (e.g. bath, dress, teeth, story time, bed).	
	Trial the use of visual timetables if they easily become distracted/forget the bedtime routine.	

	Use social stories™ to set expectations and boundaries around a bedtime. For further information on social stories™ see: Social Stories - Carol Gray (carolgraysocialstories.com)	
	Use a countdown for bedtime: visual e.g. sand timers or alarm.	
	Avoid activities that trigger over stimulation/ dysregulation e.g. avoid large rough and tumble movements and offer rhythmical, gentle rocking motions that can be soothing to the brain such as sitting in a rocking chair for stories. Avoid screens before bed. Avoid other activities your child may find difficult e.g. washing or toothbrushing and do this earlier in the day.	
	If it is challenging to follow a rigid routine or follow direct instructions from an adult try: -Going to bed for different purpose – to watch a video/read a book -Using subtle cues to signal bedtime – closing curtains, end of a particular programme, close curtains, message/reminder on a phone. You may find more useful suggestions at PDA & Sleep - PDA Society Resources (https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/resources/pda-sleep/)	
Child has difficulty getting dressed for bed	See Dressing.docx in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Sensory Resource Pack' on our website.	
	Complete dressing tasks an hour before bedtime to 'recover' from task before relaxing to sleep.	
Child has difficulties sleeping in their own bed	Consider your child's sensory preferences and if there is anything that is making it uncomfortable for them to sleep in their own bed e.g. if they are overreactive to touch, smells etc. See the sensory strategies above to try to adapt the environment to suit their sensory preferences.	
	Trial a sleeping bag to provide a sense of containment and security or create a small space e.g. with the bed in a corner, pillows and toys creating a cocoon experience.	
	Take an object that smells of parents to bed for example, a cardigan, blanket used by them, something sprayed with their perfume.	

Useful resources

[Home - The Sleep Charity \(https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/\)](https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/)

Guys and St Thomas' NHS Foundation have a very useful list of strategies and advice to support teenagers sleep.

[How to sleep well for teenagers | Evelina London \(https://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/our-services/hospital/sleep-medicine-department/how-to-sleep-well-for-teenagers.aspx\)](https://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/our-services/hospital/sleep-medicine-department/how-to-sleep-well-for-teenagers.aspx)