

Getting to sleep

When we are very young we learn how to get to sleep. We do this by linking particular things with falling asleep. Things often linked with falling asleep are darkness, quietness and being in bed. If children also learn to link other things with going to sleep, such as having a drink or having their parent sitting with them, they will come to rely on these things to get to sleep - at bedtime, or in the middle of the night. Teaching children appropriate cues to allow them to fall asleep on their own is very important.

Following a calm and consistent routine is a helpful way to promote good sleeping habits. This routine should involve cues that tell children it is time for sleep. E.g.

- Exchanging lively activities for calmer ones
- Going from living areas to the bedroom
- Exchanging bright lighting for more dim lighting (or darkness)
- Going from interacting with other people, to relaxing alone.

It is also useful to think about your child's bedroom - it needs to be quiet and comfortable. A cooler room with warm cosy bedding is best. Make sure that curtains are drawn and that it is dark enough for sleep.

How much sleep is normal for children?

Child's Age (in years)	Night time sleep required (in hours)	Day time sleep required (in hours)
1	11 - 12	1 - 3
3	11	0 - 1
6	10	0
10	9	0
14	8.5 - 9	0

Young Children

Q1. My lively nine year-old is still awake at 10 pm. What can I do?

Encourage physical exercise during the day to use up some energy. Avoid sugary foods and drinks, especially in the evenings. Decide a reasonable bedtime routine and follow it consistently. Allow only calm activities close to bedtime, such as a story. No TV. A reward chart for staying in bed could give your child extra motivation.

Q2. My 6 year-old won't settle unless I sit with him until he falls asleep. Help, I'm tired too!!

Your child has to learn to fall asleep without you. Follow the bedtime routine and put him to bed. Tell him that it is time to go to sleep and leave him in his bed. He will only learn to fall asleep alone with practice. Be prepared for a few nights of protest but if you calmly return him to bed, this will disappear in time.

Q3. My 8 year-old wakes frequently in the night and comes into our bedroom. She wants to get into bed with us. Should I let her?

If you follow a good routine at bedtime, your daughter will learn to fall asleep on her own after waking in the night too. Do not let her into your bed. Tell her calmly and firmly it is still sleep time and take her to her own bed. If she gets up again, repeat this process. At first, you may need to do this a number of times.

Q4. I settle my 7 year old to bed at 7 pm and she goes to sleep easily. She sleeps through the night, but wakes the whole family at 5 am. What can I do?

It may be that your child needs a slightly later bedtime. Agree a time in the morning that is acceptable for your child to disturb you. Set an alarm for this time and tell her to stay in her bedroom until the alarm goes. It may be useful to offer a reward to your child for successfully following this routine.

Older Children and Teenagers

Q1. I feel exhausted by 11pm, but when I get into bed I can't sleep. What can I do?

Make sure you are getting plenty of physical exercise during the day. This could be going for a walk, swimming, playing a game or doing sport. Cut down on drinking caffeinated tea, coffee and fizzy drinks, and avoid drinking them altogether after 6pm. However, milky drinks can be helpful as they contain tryptophan, a natural sleep inducer. Try listening to soothing music in bed rather than watching TV or DVDs. Try to relax (see tips on relaxation overleaf).

Q2. I often wake in the night and lie awake worrying. What can I do?

Try keeping a pen and paper next to your bed. Write down your worrying thoughts and tell yourself you can think about them in the morning. Find someone you can confide in about your worries. This may be a family member, friend or counsellor. Make a realistic plan to address your worries, (for example, how you can best manage your school work) and try to stick to it.

Q3. I'm too tired to get out of bed when my mum calls me in the mornings. I get up late and it's always a rush. Mum says I should go to bed earlier, but I'm not tired in the evenings. Please help.

Calculate how much sleep you need (see table opposite) and work backwards from the time you need to be up in the mornings. This will tell you what time you need to go to bed to get enough sleep. Follow the sleep cues and go to bed at the time you have worked out. If you can't sleep after 30 minutes get up and do something boring until you feel sleepy, then try again. Get out of bed in good time in the mornings. This will mean you will gradually become more tired in the evenings. Be patient, it could take a week for your body to adapt to your new sleeping and waking times.

Tips for Relaxation

Deep Breathing

Sit or lie down in a quiet room. Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly, through your nose, for a count of 3 or 4. Wait briefly, then exhale slowly and steadily, through your mouth, for a count of 4 or 5. Then breathe in slowly again, wait and exhale as before. Repeat several times.

It can be helpful to imagine a peaceful, relaxing picture in your mind as you practice this deep breathing.

Muscle Relaxation

Sit in a comfortable chair or lie in bed in a quiet room. You are going to relax each area of your body in turn. Start with your hands and arms. Squeeze your hands into a fist and tense the muscles in your arms. Hold that position for a count of 3. Then relax your hands and arms. Shake them gently. Notice how they feel when they are relaxed.

Now lift your shoulders up to your ears. Squeeze them up to your ears and tense your neck. Then relax and lower your shoulders. Gently move your head from side to side. Feel the muscles relax.

Screw up the muscles in your face and bite together to tense your jaw. Hold that position for 3 seconds. Now relax, gently move your jaw from side to side and feel the tension drain away.

Tighten the muscles in your stomach and hold. Make your stomach muscles as tight as you can. Hold it for 3 seconds, then breathe out and relax.

Finally, lift your legs slightly, push the heel of your foot away from you and tense all the muscles in your legs. Keep the muscles as tight as you can for 3 seconds. Then relax.

Now lie or sit still and enjoy the feeling of relaxation throughout your whole body.

Ideas for further reading:

My Child Won't Sleep (Douglas, J. and Richman, N.)

Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems (Ferber, R.)

Get a Better Night's Sleep (Oswald, I. And Adam, K.)

Useful websites

www.bbc.co.uk/parenting/your_kids/primary_sleep

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthandgrowingup/7sleepproblemsinchildhood

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Tips for Better Sleep

