

Establishing healthy sleep habits early on supports children in their growth and development throughout life. However, forming and maintaining a consistent sleep routine can be challenging for many families for many reasons.

Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes or easy answers to these often exhausting times, however we hope this guide provides some handy hints on your journey to a better night's sleep for everyone!



## How much sleep does my child need?

There is no exact number of hours a child should or shouldn't be sleeping, and what one child needs may differ from the next. However, as a rough guide the following number of hours may be helpful in supporting your child through a 24-hour sleep cycle, this includes naps.

Between the ages of 4 and 12 months - 12 to 16 hours

Between the ages of 1 and 2 years - 10 to 13 hours

Between the ages of 3 and 5 years - 10 to 13 hours

Between the ages of 6 and 12 years - 9 to 12 hours (at this point you should no longer expect regular naps)



## Why won't my child sleep?

Everyone goes through periods of disturbed sleep such as when we are unwell, stressed or excited, factors which can be impacted by the day we have had, food we have eaten and environment in which we are sleeping. For children with sensory processing challenges or other SEN their sleep routines and the environment in which they are sleeping may have a larger impact on their ability to settle and quality of sleep. It is important to reflect on what our routines and environments consist of before we can see some development in a child's sleep. It may be useful to keep a sleep diary for at least 3 days before putting any changes into place, this will help to establish your child's sleep pattern and recognise small changes when they happen.

## Sleep routines

- Consistency. Same time, same place, same steps.
- Keep it simple. For example, bath time, pyjamas, toothbrushing, story.
- No screen time for at least an hour before bed – the blue light inhibits melatonin (the naturally occurring sleep chemical).
- Calm activities. No high energy games, like chase or jumping during the sleep routine.
- Worry box/ monster. These are a great before bed talking point to encourage children to “dump” their worries before bedtime.
- Use a visual timeline to support the steps of the sleep routine.



## Bedtime environment – sensory checklist

- Look at light levels, children may prefer total darkness or warm low lighting.
- Consider visual distractions, are there lots of toys on display or the TV playing in the background.
- Consider the noise, some children enjoy gentle music or white noise, others may find the hum of a screen on standby distracting.
- Feel of pyjamas or sheets, is your child comfortable in what they are sleeping in?
- Temperature of the room, is warm or cool enough not to disturb your child in their sleep? Is there a draft you could block with a draft excluder?
- Bodily functions, build using the toilet into your pre-bed routine.
- Lavender is a calming scent which may support your child in settling.
- Consider sleep time rules such as curtains closed for sleep time and open for awake time.
- Create a social story with photos of your child’s bedtime routine for them to enjoy and recognise the sleep time rules.
- Consider the language you use, “bedtime” means they should be in bed and if they are then they have met this request, however “sleep time” reminds them what they should be doing and supports establishing this as a time for sleep.



## Gradual withdrawal strategy

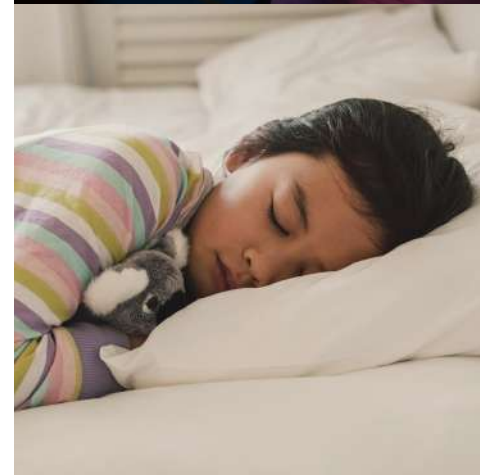
For some children having an adult lie with them is the most important thing before falling asleep, however this doesn't support a long term ability to settle into a good night sleep and can cause distress when children wake and the adult is no longer present. Gradual withdrawal of the adult can support you reducing the need for this.

- Lie next to the child for 3 nights
- Lie next to the bed for 3 nights
- Move closer to the door for 3 nights
- Sit visibly outside the door for 3 nights
- Sit outside the door with it closed for 3 nights

You may need to go back a step if your child is struggling with the change and if your child is unwell you may find you need to start the process again.

If your child wakes during the night remember to continue a calm and low arousal routine. Avoid turning on lights, offer comfort as needed but don't overwhelm with lots of conversation, avoid playing with toys and only offer water if they are thirsty. You may need to repeat your gradual withdrawal step to help them settle again during the night.

Sleep time will not be perfect every night and some nights will be smoother than others, forgive yourself and your child and try again tomorrow.



For further information please visit:

- [Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children's website](#)
- [NHS website](#)

If you have concerns regarding your child's sleep speak to your GP or health visitor.