

The Good sleep guide for children

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Like adults, children need the right amount of sleep to be healthy. They also need the right amount of rest to do well at school. Sleep is essential for the release of growth hormones in children and is similarly important for their brain and emotional development.

It can help them make sense of things that happened that day, including what they learned at school and other life skills that they pick up on a regular basis.

But sleep difficulties are among the most common problems in children, with many toddlers and young children unable to settle at night or waking during the night. However, there are several things you can do to make sure your child gets the sleep and rest they need – not to mention help you sleep better too.

Did you know?

Children who don't get enough sleep are more likely to be overweight or obese than those who get the right amount. (Source: NHS Choices)

Is your child getting enough?

Most adults realise they should be getting seven to eight hours a night. But what's the right amount of sleep for a toddler or a teenager?

The amount of sleep your child needs largely depends on their age. Here's a guide to recommended approximate sleep times from experts at the Millpond Children's Sleep Clinic:

| AGE | APPROXIMATE SLEEP TIMES |
|-----------|--|
| 3 months | 4-5 hours during the day, 11 hours at night |
| 6 months | 3 hours during the day, 11 hours at night |
| 9 months | 2.5 hours during the day, 11 hours at night |
| 12 months | 2.5 hours during the day, 11 hours at night |
| 2 years | 1.5 hours during the day, 11.5 hours at night |
| 3 years | 0-45 mins during the day, 11.5-12 hours at night |
| 4 years | 11.5 hours at night |
| 5 years | 11 hours at night |
| 6 years | 10.75 hours at night |
| 7 years | 10.5 hours at night |
| 8 years | 10.25 hours at night |
| 9 years | 10 hours at night |
| 10 years | 9.75 hours at night |
| 11 years | 9.5 hours at night |
| 12 years | 9.25 hours at night |
| 13 years | 9.25 hours at night |
| 14 years | 9 hours at night |
| 15 years | 9 hours at night |
| 16 years | 9 hours at night |

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Preparing for sleep

One of the most important things parents can do when it comes to making sure a younger child gets a good night's sleep is to establish a bedtime routine that's the same every night. This can help your child get ready to fall asleep. So try to work out a routine that would fit in with you and your family, while allowing your child to get all the sleep they need.

For instance, you could start their bedtime routine with a warm (not hot) bath, followed by getting into their pyjamas, having a drink, brushing their teeth, getting into bed then reading for a few minutes or listening to relaxing music before the lights go out. Most experts say the entire routine should last for 30-40 minutes. And the more you follow the exact same routine at the same time each night, the easier it will be for your child to settle down and fall asleep.

It's also a good idea to avoid giving children any foods or drinks that may stimulate them too close to bedtime, such as fizzy drinks, sweets, tea or coffee (most experts recommend giving children either water or milk to drink before they go to bed). You may want to avoid any stimulating behaviour in the hour or so leading up to bedtime too, as an excited child will find it much more difficult to sleep and may also wake up during the night.

Other things that may help include the following:

- Try to make sure your child – whatever their age – is getting enough exercise support & care during the day, as it will help them to get a better night's sleep (though avoid exercise in the two hours leading up to bedtime).
- Avoid talking to your child about anything that may be worrying them after you've started your bedtime routine, as it could make them anxious and even make it more likely that they'll have a nightmare.
- Try to stay calm and relaxed, even if your child is being difficult and refusing to go to sleep.
- Avoid letting your child back into your main living area once they're ready for bed (if they get up after they've gone to bed, put them back to bed instead of letting them stay with you).
- Don't allow your child to sleep late in the morning, even after a restless night – getting up at the same time every day will help to establish a regular night-time sleep pattern.
- Once your child is old enough to not need any sleep during the day, try to avoid any daytime napping, as it could make them less tired at bedtime.
- If your child is older, encourage them to learn relaxation techniques to help them get ready for sleep, such as deep breathing exercises or visualisation (help them to imagine they're in a relaxing place, with all the sights, sounds and sensations that come with it).
- When your child gets a little older and has a well-established sleep pattern, you may want to allow them to stay up a bit later than their usual routine on weekends or on special occasions.

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Create a relaxing environment

Like adults, children are much more likely to sleep well if their bedroom is a comfortable, calm and relaxing environment.

Tidy away clutter

Ideally, a child's bedroom should be for sleep and sleep only. However, the reality is that most children have lots of toys and other distracting items in their bedrooms. But before getting into your bedtime routine, make sure they tidy away all their toys and games as much as possible. If they like to take a cuddly toy to bed with them, let them have just one, as having more than one toy in bed may be too stimulating.

Maintain the right temperature

Children's bedrooms shouldn't be too hot or too cold, and health experts recommend keeping the temperature at around 18-24°C.

Keep it dark

The darker your child's bedroom, the easier it will be for their body to produce a hormone called melatonin that encourages sleep. If there are bright street lights outside, consider getting some thick curtains or black-out blinds to reduce any light that may be seeping into their room. If, however, they feel anxious when they're in the dark, use a small nightlight or leave the landing light on and the door slightly ajar.

Keep noise to a minimum

Quiet is also essential for children to get a good night's sleep, so turn down your TV, radio or music after they've gone to bed. If there's regular noise coming from outside, you may want to think about getting double glazing or moving them to another bedroom that's quieter. Try to make sure there's nothing inside the bedroom that could make a noise and wake them up too.

Freshen things up

Having fresh bedding that's well aired can help a child feel more relaxed in bed, which can help them to get to sleep more easily. Check to make sure their bed is comfortable, including their mattress and pillows. Also avoid smoking in your child's bedroom, even when they're not there.

Impose a digital curfew

Older children's bedrooms usually have a range of digital screen devices, including TVs, computers, tablets, mobile phones and other electronic gadgets. Teenagers, for instance, are thought to spend six hours a day in front of screens.

Studies suggest the longer anyone spends on a mobile phone or other digital device before going to bed, the more likely they'll take a long time falling asleep and get less sleep than they need.

The reason this happens is the bright light of a device's screen is thought to trigger chemicals in the brain that keep children – and adults – awake. That's why it's a good idea to impose a digital curfew every evening before starting your child's bedtime routine – so no texting, TV, video games

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or using the computer for at least half an hour before starting to get ready for bed.

It's also a good idea to make sure your child's bedroom isn't full of electronic devices that could disrupt their sleep (or, in the case of teenagers, tempt them to use smartphones, laptops and other devices late at night). If they tend to charge one or more of their digital devices in their bedroom at night, get them to do it downstairs instead.

More help for sleep problems

If your child continues to have problems getting to sleep or with waking through the night, the best person to speak to is your GP or health visitor who may refer you to another expert, such as a child psychologist. You may also be advised to see an expert at a sleep clinic, where you can get help and support.

Find out if there's a sleep clinic near where you live.

Meanwhile, if you're referred to an expert, it's a good idea to keep a diary of your child's sleep problems, as it may help them to get to the root of the problem. So for at least a week before your appointment, make a note of when your child went to bed, how long it took them to get to sleep, how often they woke during the night (and if so, how long were they awake), and how long they slept for altogether. It may also be useful to write down whether or not they were active before going to bed or if they're anxious or worried about anything.

The good news is most children's sleep problems

can be resolved, though you may need to be patient at first.

Useful links

If you are experiencing any of the issues covered in this guide, in the first instance call our free helpline on 0808 801 0550. Our Advisors will listen without judging and will work with you as best they can to achieve a positive outcome.

If you prefer you can email:

helpline@ltcharity.org; . Visit our website:

www.licensedtradecharity.org.uk; It's full of useful information about the kind of issues we know people who work in the licensed trade face.

Other sources of information

Enuresis Resource & Information Centre

www.eric.org.uk

ERIC is the children's continence charity, supporting children with continence problems such as wetting the bed.

Scope

www.scope.org.uk

Charity supporting disabled people that provides a service called Sleep Solutions, which aims to help families of disabled children who have severe sleep problems.

The Sleep Council

www.sleepcouncil.org.uk

For information on sleep for all the family, including a handy leaflet you can download called The Good-Night Guide For Children.

Young Minds

www.youngminds.org.uk

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Charity supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing, including help for parents whose children are having problems with their sleep.