



Sleeping Tip Sheet for Parents

When children have difficulty sleeping, it can be a real problem for both the child and parents getting their needed rest. Lack of sleep will compound any other challenges in their day that a child is experiencing (sensory, emotional, behavioural, etc.). Steady sleep patterns are essential to keep the nervous system calm and organized. Listed below are several of the common strategies used to stabilize sleep patterns.

Consistent bedtime routine

The body needs to calm down and relax in order to sleep effectively. One of the best ways to stabilize sleep is establishing a consistent, relaxing routine before going to bed. The child should go to bed and rise at the same time every day. This helps establish a consistent sleep cycle for the body. The bedtime routine should consist of a sequence of relaxing events that lowers the child's arousal level. This means high stimulating activity, including screen time, should be limited at least 1-2 hours before bedtime. Common activities in bedtime routines are taking a bath, brushing teeth, toileting, getting out clothes for tomorrow, getting a drink of water, reading a story, snuggling in bed, recounting their day, saying prayers, etc. Keeping the same sequence of tasks each evening helps to build a predictable routine. If needed, you can use a visual schedule with pictures for the child to follow.

Setting up the environment

Setting up the environment for a successful sleep is important. Think about:

- Noise
If your child is a light sleeper, noise and activity going on in the house can disturb their sleep as well as common noises occurring outside. If needed, try using a consistent background noise (environmental tapes, soft music, white noise machine, fan, etc.) that will mask any other noises.
- Lighting
If the child is scared of the dark, then a night light may be needed. Or maybe there are outside light sources that are disturbing your child's sleep (streetlights, house lights,

flashing lights on electronic devices in the room etc.)? If so, make sure they are blocked out.

- Temperature
Another factor that could disrupt sleep is temperature. If the room is too cold or too hot, the child's nervous system will stay on high alert and not be able to sleep.
- Scents (Olfactory)
Scents that have known calming and sleep inducing properties are camomile and lavender. Use these in bath oils, creams or sleep sprays if your child enjoys the smell. Avoid arousing scents such as peppermint and citrus as well as any scents that you know your child dislikes.
- Tactile
Be aware of any tactile sensitivity that may present problems for your child. Are the pyjamas a material that your child feels comfortable in? Are the sheets and blankets? If any of these are too "scratchy" for the child, the nervous system will not relax.
- Distractions
Are the child's favourite toys nearby or at eye-level? Sometimes this can be very distracting to a child and can hype a child up. If this is the case with your child, consider having all toys in a separate playroom rather than in the bed. The bedroom should be associated primarily with sleeping.

Favourite video or song

Although you want to limit electronics that actively engage the child, for some children, having the same favourite video playing in their room each night often calms and soothes them. They typically do not watch it; just having the familiar scripts in the background relaxes them. These favourite videos or music can represent security in something they love, blocks out other noise and gives them a familiar sensory pattern that calms and regulates them. Lullabies, white noise, soft instrumental music could all be helpful in soothing your child.

Deep pressure and snuggables

As a general rule, deep pressure calms the nervous system and can promote sound sleeping. Ideas to provide deep pressure include; snuggling with large pillows, stuffed animals or a body pillow, using lots of heavy blankets or a weighted blanket, wrapping your child up in a sleeping bag, snuggling with a pet or simply having a pet sleeping in the same bed, massage and joint compression, being dried after a bath with a warm towel or having lotion/cream rubbed in. Consult your Occupational Therapist for more information and assistance with deep pressure strategies.

Diet

A good diet will help stabilise the nervous system so it will sleep better. As an evening snack, you can try sleep inducing foods/drinks such as warm milk, bananas and cinnamon. Make sure to avoid sugary foods before bedtime and avoid sending children to bed hungry.

Exercise

Exercise also plays an important role in stabilising a child's nervous system. Making sure a child engages in exercise such as walking, running, riding their bike, playing on the playground and engaging in individual or team sports is important. Two hours before bedtime you can have a child complete heavy work activities (including brief push and pull chores, exercising with a gym ball or lycra/stretch band, jumping on the trampoline, crashing into pillows, completing hot dog rolls and more). One hour before bedtime limit arousing physical activity and instead provide linear vestibular input (including swinging or rocking in a forwards and backwards motion). Avoid spinning, crashing and falling before bedtime.

Napping

If your child is having difficulty sleeping at night, try and avoid frequent napping throughout the day. If naps are needed mid-day, try to keep it short (30 minutes or less) and occurring at the same time every day.

Sensory integration problems

If the child has sensory processing issues, they often have problems modulating their arousal level, making it difficult to fall, or stay asleep. Their nervous system may be too "wound up" to fall asleep. A good sensory diet or strategies throughout the day can help calm and organize the nervous system. Talk to your Occupational Therapist regarding this.

Medical concerns

If the child has gastrointestinal problems, upper respiratory problems, low iron levels or any other acute medical concerns, these can keep the nervous system on "high alert", thus keeping it from falling asleep. Bed wetting and sleep apnoea could also be a factor. If you are concerned that your child has any of these difficulties seek medical help to lessen their impact.

Sleep aids

There are a host of other sleep-inducing supplements and medications that can be prescribed, but should be used as a last resort. Seek out your doctor's or trusted health practitioner's advice when using these.