



## Supporting sleep habits in children with additional needs

**All children can have difficulty sleeping at one time or another, and this can be more common in children with additional needs. It is estimated that over 80% of children with additional needs also have a sleep issue.**

**Lack of sleep can leave you feeling frustrated, tired and tense, impacting on your wellbeing and ability to cope.**

This Parent Tips resource offers some ideas to help you to understand why your child may be having trouble with sleep and to identify some positive approaches to try.

Before you start to try new things out, it can help to understand the reasons why your child may have trouble sleeping.

These can include:

- inability to self-settle;
- diet;
- sensory issues;
- over-stimulation; and
- irregular sleep routines.

The table on page 2 explains why these reasons may cause your child to have trouble sleeping and provides helpful tips for you to try.

**More information on Page 2**

**For additional Parent Tips see [www.ihv.org.uk](http://www.ihv.org.uk)**

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| Reasons for sleep issues                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Tips to try                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Inability to self-settle</b></p> <p>We sleep in cycles, drifting from deep to light sleep, and will naturally have a number of partial awakenings during the night. If everything is the same as when we fell asleep, we are less likely to wake up fully at these points.</p> | <p>Consider how your child falls asleep at the start of the night and look for any changes that may have occurred.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you switch off the landing light?</li> <li>• Do they need a television on to fall asleep that is later turned off?</li> <li>• Are you there when they nod off and then disappear? Self-settling is an important skill to learn, you can help them learn this by using use strategies such as gradual retreat or the kissing game which can be found on ChannelMum website: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Gradual retreat: <a href="https://bit.ly/3vumSuF">https://bit.ly/3vumSuF</a></li> <li>» Kissing game: <a href="https://bit.ly/3aRxLPc">https://bit.ly/3aRxLPc</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Keeping things the same throughout the night is important.</p>                                                                                                                |
| <p><b>Diet</b></p> <p>Children with additional needs may be fussy eaters and this may affect their sleep.</p>                                                                                                                                                                        | <p>If your child is eating too early or not having enough to eat, they may be waking hungry.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid sugary snacks - calcium-rich food makes a good alternative, such as yoghurt or low sugar cereal with milk.</li> <li>• Iron deficiency can also be linked to Restless Leg Syndrome. This can cause an uncomfortable sensation where children feel the urge to move their legs at bedtime and is more common in children with a diagnosis of ADHD.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p><b>Sensory issues</b></p> <p>Many children with additional needs experience sensory processing issues.</p>                                                                                                                                                                        | <p>Some noise-sensitive children may benefit from using a white noise machine throughout the night to mask out background noise.</p> <p>Other children are light sensitive and need complete darkness to sleep well. However, some find complete darkness disorientating or frightening and benefit from having a softly glowing, red-based night light left on in the room - this helps as white/blue light interferes with sleep.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p><b>Over-stimulation</b></p> <p>For example, watching or playing exciting games before going to bed can over-stimulate your child and then it is even harder for them to settle to sleep.</p>                                                                                      | <p>Having a calm bedroom environment is important and planning a relaxing routine is key. Exercising too close to bedtime can wake children up rather than wearing them out.</p> <p>Avoid high energy exciting play just before bedtime.</p> <p>If a child finds bath time fun, this can also over-excite them at bedtime - consider giving them a bath earlier in the day.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p><b>Irregular sleep routines</b></p> <p>Having a regular bedtime and wake time helps to support your child's internal body clock and keeps it on track. Our body clocks don't run on a 24-hour cycle, so routine helps prevent sleep times and wake times drifting.</p>            | <p>A predictable bedtime routine every night supporting your child to drift off to sleep in their own bed every night, helps them feel secure. If they need your presence to go to sleep consider using a gentle self settling technique such as gradual retreat or the kissing game (see link in self-settle section).</p> <p>Keeping a sleep diary will help you to identify where your child's body clock is now. (you can access a sleep diary here: <a href="https://bit.ly/3nyu9GY">https://bit.ly/3nyu9GY</a>)</p> <p>You can then gradually move bedtime by 15 minutes every few nights until you shift it to a more appropriate time.</p> <p>Try and keep "getting up time" and bedtimes at the same time every day, even at weekends and during holidays.</p> <p>For more information on supporting children to sleep, please access the NHS sleep problem in young children web page: <a href="https://bit.ly/3eEjE10">https://bit.ly/3eEjE10</a></p> |

More information on Page 3

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## Other factors

There are many more factors to consider such as medication, night-time feeds, staying in different environments, discomfort/pain, bedwetting, anxiety, and being unwell, to name but a few. It is important to try to think of all the things that may be causing the sleep difficulty, so that you can then choose an approach that treats the reason behind the poor sleep.

**Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone that our bodies produce when it gets dark. It helps us to feel sleepy.**

Evidence suggests that some children with additional needs do not produce enough melatonin, making it harder for them to fall asleep at night. NOTE: Melatonin does not keep children asleep so, if we don't address the reasons a child may be waking, and try to understand them, your child will still wake up even when they have enough melatonin. You can support the production of melatonin by doing things such as:

- Dimming the lights in the run up to bedtime
- Avoiding screen activities and white/blue light

Some children will need a prescription of melatonin to help them to fall asleep. If you are worried, speak with your health visitor, GP or Paediatrician.

## There may be medical reasons that disrupt your child's sleep:

### Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA):

- Requires specialist support from a healthcare professional.
- OSA is a condition that affects how we breathe and is caused by an obstruction of the airway in the nose, throat or upper airway, when a child is asleep.
- The first symptoms most parents notice is snoring and that their child is sleeping in an unusual position.
- Children with OSA often don't sleep well and this can affect their behaviour during the day. They may display hyperactive or aggressive behaviours or may have difficulty concentrating.
- When they wake-up in the morning they may still feel tired and appear unhappy, with a headache, or may refuse breakfast.
- If you would like more information about this, please look at the [British Lung Foundation webpage on OSA](#).

Other medical issues can also impact sleep, such as eczema and epilepsy. Some specific conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism can disrupt a child's sleep, as well as clinical conditions which require interventions overnight, such as feeds, monitors and positioning equipment. If your child experiences bedwetting and you are concerned, you should speak to your health visitor. They can offer support with sleep strategies and referral for additional specialist support if needed.

Changing sleep behaviour is difficult. It helps to have a consistent approach. When introducing a new approach, stick with it consistently at every sleep for at least 2 weeks to see if it makes a difference. It is important that everyone who looks after your child also follows the same consistent approach – tell them what you are doing and ask for their support by doing the same. Be aware that poor sleeping habits can become worse before they get better, this is nothing to worry about. Choose a time to make any changes when you have the energy and support to carry them through. Make it easier by focusing on one change at a time.

We all have different sleep needs and so do our children. You are the expert on your child – choose an approach that you feel will work best for them and for you.

Here are some approaches to consider:

- **Using a visual timetable** may help your child to understand what to expect as bedtime approaches. Include things like screen time ending, a supper time snack, calming activities, toilet, teeth and getting into bed. It may be helpful to include a wake-up symbol, some children are literal and worry that they may not wake from their sleep.

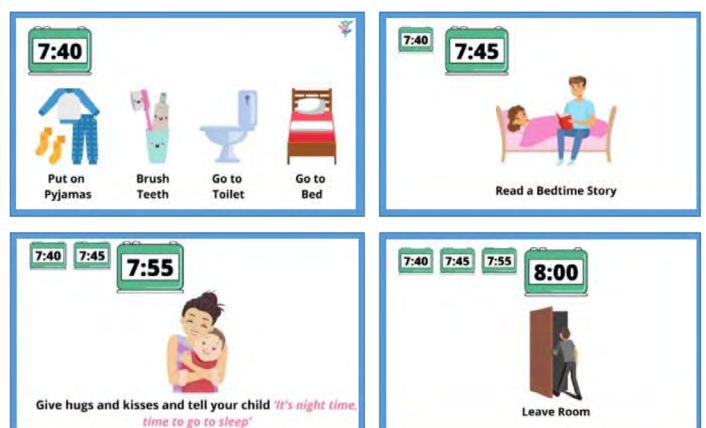


Image credit: NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde - Sleep. <https://bit.ly/2QP2be3>

[More information on Page 4](#)

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- **Use simple, positive language around bedtime.** Avoid telling your child what you don't want them to do and instead tell them what you do want them to do. For more information around this, see iHV Parent Tips "Using positive statements to tell our children what we want them to do" available here: <https://bit.ly/3gOBYHq>. Give your child choices in the bedtime routine to help them to feel more in control, 'would you like to wear your blue or red pyjamas?'
- **Make a bedtime box full of calming activities to bring out during the hour before bed.** Think about your child's interests when planning this, it might include jigsaws, colouring activities, books. Turn off screens an hour before bed and dim the lights, spend some time exploring the bedtime box together without any distractions.
- **If possible, avoid things that over-excite your child or cause them distress during the bedtime routine.** If they find a bath over-stimulating, choose to do it at an earlier point in the day. If nail clipping is traumatic, do not attempt it in the bedtime routine.
- **Make the bedroom a safe and calm place to be, never use it as a punishment.** We want children to build positive associations with the bedroom and sleep. Never use staying up late as a reward- this can signal that that sleep is a negative, it will also disrupt their routine and can make poor sleep habits worse.
- **Check over the bedroom environment to understand what may affect their behaviour when they are trying to sleep.** Take out any items that may cause injury. There are specialist manufacturers that make furniture suitable for youngsters with challenging behaviour - talk to your health visitor, GP or Paediatrician if you think your child would benefit from these. Is there anything which upsets or frightens them? This can be as simple as a shadow of a dressing gown or a toy which glows in the dark. Ask them what they don't like about their bedroom at night.
- **Make bedtimes positive and reward the behaviours that you do want to see more of.** Use reward systems that are motivating for your child. These can be anything from sticker charts, marble jars or choosing which game you play the next day. Never take rewards away and always reward immediately.
- **End the evening with a simple, set phrase such as 'it's night-time, go to sleep'.** This signals the end of the day. Repeat this phrase consistently, throughout the night, to signal that now is not the time to play or chat.
- **Keep calm!** Children pick up on your anxiety levels and they can then become anxious, making it more difficult for them to fall asleep. Take some deep breaths, remind yourself about what you are hoping to achieve and what you will gain from helping your child to develop good sleep habits. You can do this. Contact your health visitor for more support if anxiety is getting you down.
- **Support your child's understanding around sleep by using language relating to "day and night" rather than "light and dark".** Consider how they will know if it is time to get up if they wake during the night - you could put a lamp on a timer switch and teach them that if the lamp is off it is still sleep time.

**Improving sleep issues is complex and, if you are struggling, you can discuss your worries with your health visitor. They can offer one-to-one support to help your child, and you, enjoy a better night's sleep.**

## List of useful leaflets and resources

- Learning Disability Matters – Sleep: <https://bit.ly/2NNvtso>
- The Sleep Charity: <https://bit.ly/3vruiPx>
- Scope Sleep Right: <https://bit.ly/3ekNo2l>
- Contact – Helping your child sleep: <https://bit.ly/3gxUI33>
- NHS – Healthy Sleep Tips for Children: <https://bit.ly/3tOSomH>

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