Part A: Behavioural Sleep Problems in Children

This section discusses common problems with children's sleep and how to establish good bedtime routines with them.

1. What can you do to get your child into bed at the right time?

Set up a bedtime routine. Stick to it each night. This helps your child's body and mind to get ready for bed. They will go to sleep more easily if they go to bed at about the same time each night. They are more likely to wake at about the same time each morning as well. Parents must always be ready to be firm if their child acts up around bedtime.

2. What is a bedtime routine?

It is best to start with a 30 to 60 minute quiet time. Keep your child away from computers, TVs and anything else that is too stimulating during this time. It is normal to include a bath/shower, pyjamas, a drink, cleaning teeth, a toilet visit, a bedtime story, a goodnight kiss and then lights out as parents leave the bedroom. Put limits on what you let your child do here. Don’t let them stall for time.

3. How do you determine lights out time so your child gets enough sleep?

This varies with each child and depends on their overnight sleep requirement (see Sleep Needs) and when they have to wake up to prepare for the day’s activities.

4. Your child is finding it hard to go to sleep. What can you do?

- Make sure that your child prepares for bed in a way that helps them relax and feel ready for sleep. Think about what should and should not be in the bedroom. You want it to be a relaxing place. (See Sleep Tips for Children)
- Make sure there are no noises that disturb your child’s sleep such as TV noise.
- Make sure your child can switch off their thinking after lights out. This will make settling into sleep easier. You can teach your child things such as simple breathing or relaxation exercises. These distract the mind and slow it down, so sleep can come. Quiet time with no technology before bed time will help. Soft quiet music may also help.
- Make sure that your child is not going to bed too early or too late.

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Both can make it hard to settle into sleep. Try to be aware of when your child gets sleepy in the evening. This will let you know when the sleep processes are starting to kick in. From this you can work out when the best time to go to bed is. Remember, as your child gets older the time at which their sleepiness builds will be a bit later. This means bedtime is a bit later too.

- Make sure that your child does not grow to need you to help them to go to sleep. They need to learn how to settle into sleep alone. (See below).

5. Why does your child keep waking you up during the night?

Your child can wake naturally several times a night. These disturbances last a few seconds to a few minutes. They should be able to self-settle back into sleep. But if your child has not learned how to self-settle, they may wake you or come to your bed to seek your help to go back to sleep. It’s worth teaching your child to self-settle at the start of the night. This will help them to be able to self-settle through the night.

6. How can you teach your child to self-settle into sleep?

- To teach them how to do this, you need to go out of the room with the lights out. You should do this before they are asleep. This gives them the chance to fall asleep with no help from you and when you’re not in the room with them. It usually takes 15 to 20 minutes for them to fully get to sleep.

- If your child has never gone to sleep without you, explain to them what is going to happen. Be firm but reassuring to your child about being able to go to sleep when you’re not in the room.

- Some children will get worried about this or try to not let you leave the room. Some will get out of bed to find you. In this case you can take things more slowly. You can go back into the room on and off, for a short time. If you need to, you can put them back into bed, get them to lie down and tell them to go to sleep. When this is done, you leave the room. You may need to do this over and over. Each time, spend longer and longer out of the room. If you are consistent and stick with this, then you will succeed. Remember to keep a lid on your emotions when in the bedroom. Also be as boring as possible.

- One more thing you can do is to put a stretcher bed or mattress next to your child’s bed. Be there, but have very little interaction with your child. The only thing you should do is tell them to go to sleep. Remember that this should only be a temporary thing. Once they are used to this they will go to sleep without being told to. Then you should start to gradually get out of the bedroom. It is important that once you start this not to give in. Don’t go back to old ways. This will confuse your child and make it harder the next time you try to change. You can also use this if they have been sleeping with you and you want to teach them to sleep in their own bed.

7. Are there other reasons why my child may wake up or stay awake at night?

- After waking up at night, your child may find it hard to get back to sleep. This is due to their brain starting to think about things which keep them awake. Your child may not tell you about this and lay awake in bed for some time. In the morning they may be hard to wake even though it seems they have had enough time in bed to get the sleep they need.

- Remember to ask them in the morning if they had a good sleep. This lets them tell you if they have any problems with their sleep. Help them to learn how to deal with sleep problems. If necessary, see a Sleep Specialist.

There are other reasons why your child might wake up at night. These include illness, being too hot or cold, hunger, nightmares, and night terrors.

8. What can you do if your child is anxious, is scared of the dark or has night-time fears about bedtime?

- A small dim night light can help. When your child wakes during the night, having some light helps them work out where they are and know they are safe. Taking a comfort object to bed, like a teddy bear, can help your child not feel so alone at night. Remember to reassure them that nothing will hurt them. Sometimes a baby monitor in their room (linked to you) will help. This can work well even with older fearful children.

9. How can you help your child to stay in their own bed?

- Be consistent and assertive about your child staying in their bed. If you do not want them to sleep in your bed, always take them back to their own bed when they come to your bed. Always remind them that you expect them to stay in their own bed all night.

- Help them to learn how to deal with sleep problems. If necessary, see a Sleep Specialist. They might have OSA (Obstructive Sleep Apnea), which is a breathing problem during sleep. Clues that your child has OSA include loud snoring, noisy breathing, having to make more of an effort to breathe, or not breathing consistently with pauses and gasps every now and then. OSA causes a restless sleep pattern. OSA can also be linked with night sweats, mouth breathing, sleeping in strange positions and morning headaches. A young child with OSA might grow and gain weight slowly. When children with OSA wake up, they don’t look refreshed. They may have}

Part B: Selected Sleep Disorders in Children

This section discusses the most common sleep disorders seen in children. Expert help and effective treatments are available for each of them.

10. You notice that your child snores at night, has very restless sleep and wakes in the morning but does not look refreshed.

Your child may have Obstructive Sleep Apnea.
behaviour and learning problems during the day and perform poorly at school. OSA in children tends to be caused by large tonsils and / or adenoids. Some children have a higher risk of OSA because of factors such as obesity, a narrow face or small jaw, Down syndrome, neurological problems, weak muscles or cleft palate.

11. Your child finds it hard to settle into sleep. They complain that their legs don’t feel comfortable and they have to move them or get out of bed to walk around.

   Your child may have Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS).

Restless Legs Syndrome is a movement disorder. Strange feelings are felt in the legs when the legs are at rest, or when lying down ready for sleep. These feelings make the child want to move the legs or walk around. When they move their legs, they will feel better for a short time. But the feelings often soon come back. These tend to occur in the time before sleep much more than at any other time of day. Being sleep deprived makes it more likely.

12. Your child moves frequently during sleep and wakes in the morning but does not look refreshed.

   Your child may have Periodic Limb Movements during sleep (PLMS).

Periodic Limb Movements are when your child moves a body part during sleep. It is most common in the legs. The limb moves or jerks over and over, then stays still for a time. After a while, the limb starts moving again. This can disturb sleep and may cause daytime problems with behaviour, learning and sleepiness.

13. Your child wakes up all of a sudden at night. They look anxious or in distress. You may have seen them moving their arms and legs over and over. Or they may sleep in a strange position. At night, they might go stiff or call out.

   This may be due to a parasomnia.

Parasomnias are a group of night time sleep problems. They are most common from 2 to 8 years of age. Common types are Sleep Terrors (also called night terrors), confusion on waking, Sleep Walking, sleep talking and Nightmares. Risk factors include insufficient sleep or stress. It can also run in families. Parasomnias are usually thought of as normal in children. They do not normally need treatment, except if they are very frequent or there is a risk that the child might hurt themselves. Parents should stay calm and try to resettle their child. Much more rarely, nocturnal seizures (epilepsy) can occur as the child goes to sleep, during sleep or just after waking in the morning. They can happen even if the child has never had a seizure during the day.

14. Your child is in a habit of going to bed at 10pm, but now they are going to school and they must go to sleep at 8pm. They are finding it hard to adjust to this earlier time.

   Your child may be suffering from Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome (DSPS).

Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome is a sleep problem with the internal body clock. It controls the sleep times of the body. With DSPS, the body clock has been trained to go to sleep later through habit. But you can retrain it so your child can go to sleep earlier. To do this, get them to go to bed 15 minutes earlier each night for a week. Changing things step by step is easier than a sudden change. Be sure they get plenty of bright light (e.g. outdoor) as soon as they need to wake up.

15. Your child is very sleepy during the day, every day and the most common reasons have been ruled out. There are a lot of things that could cause this.

In the rare neurological condition called Narcolepsy the brain can’t control the desire to sleep while it’s awake. If your child has it, they may feel very sleepy during the day, or fall asleep uncontrollably. It may be linked with other symptoms such as cataplexy (sudden loss of muscle strength). To work out if your child has narcolepsy or not, they will need to do an overnight sleep study and daytime nap studies. A paediatric Sleep Specialist needs to do this. If they do turn out to have this sleep disorder, a management plan will be developed. Plans to manage their sleep and wake behaviour and, perhaps, medication will be a part of this. See also Excessive Daytime Sleepiness.

Note: Underlined topics can be found in the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au.