



Getting children to sleep



Following on from our last post "Why Do Children Need Sleep?" - this post is on helping children to sleep.

We know sleep is good for all of us, particularly for restoring energy and helping children grow and develop. The question is how do we ensure children get enough sleep?

How do you know your child is getting enough sleep?

If your child wakes easily in the morning: happy, cheerful and full of energy, they have had enough sleep.

If children are hard to wake, are dozy, inattentive, hyperactive and have regular meltdowns they are probably not getting enough sleep.

The good thing is children love predictability and knowing what happens next. It makes them feel safe and secure. This means if your child and family have daily and weekly routines, this helps to establish good sleep patterns. Here are a few suggestions on how to establish good sleep routines with children:

1. **Physical activity or exercise** - Ensure your child is regularly physically active during the day as exercise helps tire them out. However stop intense physical activity 1-2 hours before bed time as exercise stimulates the brain.
2. **Food** - only eat small snacks (crackers and fruit) in the two hours before going to bed.
3. **Avoid caffeine** - caffeine is in a lot of energy and fizzy drinks as well as tea, coffee and chocolate. Caffeine is not recommended for children and teenagers, however if they have caffeine restrict it to early in the day.
4. **Screens** - Stop screen time at least an hour before bed. Screen lights trick the brain into thinking it's still daylight stimulating hormones that keep us awake. We recommend TV's, phones, computers and video games are not in bedrooms over night or better still not in bedrooms at all.

5. **Regular bed time and getting up time** - first work out how much sleep your child needs, some need a little less than others and some children are larks and others are night owls. This will affect what bed time you set. For a guide see the chart below. Routines can vary a little in the weekends and holidays.

Age group	Recommended amount of sleep
Newborns	14 to 17 hours a day
12 months	About 10 hours at night, plus 4 hours of naps
2 years	About 11 to 12 hours at night, plus a 1- to 2-hour afternoon nap
3 to 5 years	10 to 13 hours
6 to 13 years	9 to 11 hours
14 to 17 years	8 to 10 hours
Adults	7 to 9 hours

6. **Bed time routine** - this is very important and should start an hour or so before bed time and may include:
- o having a bath or shower
 - o having a quiet time
 - o story or reading time
 - o clean teeth
 - o being tucked in and kissed goodnight quietly

We recommend that your approach during this routine be quieter and calmer than your usual interactions and that the general activity around the house be slowed down if possible.

1. **Bed room environment** - to encourage sleep the bed room needs to be cool, dark and quiet. A night light may help some children who are afraid of the dark. If you want to block out the noise of the household use a machine like a fan that has a regular monotonous rhythm to it.
2. **Afternoon naps** - between ages 3-4 children generally stop their afternoon nap. Ensure children older than 4 years have a shorter nap (less than 30 minutes) and not within three hours of bedtime.
3. **Stress and anxiety** - talking to a child in a quiet calm manner will help keep their stress hormones down and help address any fears. If simple reassurance doesn't work, you can try having a special toy to stand guard at night or spray the room with "monster spray" before bed. (A can of air freshener with a creative new label works well.) If you have a child who worries about not getting to sleep, don't focus on the sleep, focus on relaxing and having a quiet time.

4. **Modelling** - Children take their lead from their parents so it's important to have a good routine for yourself.
5. **Sleeping is still a problem** - if after trying these strategies for a month or so and your child is still having trouble sleeping see your Doctor.

Don't underestimate your children's need for sleep. Here at Therapy Professionals we see some children whose disabilities worsened and others who have been labelled as hyperactive, disobedient, or clumsy when poor sleep has been the significant problem.

We all want our children to thrive and one thing we can do for them is establish good sleeping habits. This will help the child and the household.

References

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