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Bedtime Routines

A good routine is important to help children to develop better sleep habits. You must be consistent when you implement a new routine, your child's sleep patterns may appear to become worse before they get better as they may try to resist new changes that you make. Parents often give up when implementing a routine as they feel that it isn't working, you need to give any changes at least 2 weeks in order to see results.

Here are our top tips for developing a good bedtime routine:

- Do the same thing at the same time each day, including waking your child at the same time each morning, this will strengthen their body clock. Yes we know this is hard on a Saturday and Sunday, but it is also very important!
- Switch off computers and televisions an hour before bedtime, these can be very stimulating activities and can hinder a good night's sleep. Screen activity can also interfere with the body's production of the sleep hormone melatonin!



Continued overleaf

- Fine motor skill activities help children to relax, encourage them to take part in these before bedtime. Colouring in, jigsaws, threading activities all help to promote relaxation. You will need to plan appropriate relaxing activities in advance.
- If your child enjoys being bathed then you should include this within your routine. A bath 30 minutes before bed is perfect for aiding sleep. The decrease in body temperature after getting out of a bath makes us feel sleepy around half an hour later.
- Give your child warnings that bedtime is approaching, you may use a visual timetable to show them what is going to happen next.
- Use calming music as part of your bedtime routine to help your child to begin to wind down.
- Say goodnight and leave your child to fall asleep by themselves if possible.
- Do not leave your child watching television or listening to CDs if they have sleep issues, they must learn to fall asleep by themselves at the start of the night so that they can then resettle themselves to sleep should they wake up during the night.
- Write down the routine so that everybody involved knows what the procedure is.
- A bedtime story is a lovely way to end the day.



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How to Create a Calm Bedroom

Children benefit from having a calm bedroom environment in order to promote relaxation and get a good night's sleep.

It is important to spend some time planning your child's bedroom to make sure that it is relaxing rather than stimulating.

Some products on the market can actually over stimulate children or lead them to develop sleep associations that cannot be maintained throughout the night.



Here are some top tips to make sure that your child's bedroom is restful and helps to promote sleep:

- Decorate in neutral, calming colours, bright colours can be over stimulating.
- Never use the bedroom as a place where your child is sent as a sanction. The bedroom should be a place that is viewed positively.

Continued overleaf

- Watching television is very stimulating and can interfere with the body's production of the sleep hormone, melatonin. Make the bedroom a screen free zone, this includes computers and mobile phones.
- Make sure that toys are covered or stored away - they can be tempting for little ones to get out of bed and play with.
- Consider what is on display in your child's room. Could the posters be over stimulating or even scary in the darkness?
- Avoid props such as mobiles and light shows to help your child to sleep. Any conditions in place at the start of the night need to continue throughout the night.
- A dark bedroom environment can help to support a good night's sleep. Blackout blinds can be helpful, particularly during the summer months.
- If your child is afraid of the dark or has a visual/hearing impairment they may find a totally darkened room makes them feel anxious. If you use a nightlight then choose one with a soft glow that can be safely left on all night.
- Never have the bedroom too warm. Ideally the bedroom temperature should be around 16 to 18 degrees.
- If your child is noise sensitive, white noise can help to mask out background noise.



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Relaxation Tips for Bedtime

Feeling relaxed is important in the run up to bedtime for both you and your child. If your child is experiencing difficulties sleeping it can make you both feel anxious. Children quickly pick up on the stress levels of those around them so it is important to try to keep calm as bedtime approaches.

The tips below may help:

- Turn off all screen activities an hour before bedtime eg computers, television and mobile phones. This will help your child to calm their mind. Screen activities can also inhibit the production of melatonin (the sleep hormone that makes us feel drowsy).
- Avoid physical activity in the run up to bedtime. Exercising too close to bedtime can actually wake your child up.
- If your child is a worrier set aside some time during the day to give them your full attention and to find out how their day has been.



Continued overleaf

- Dimming the lights in the hour before bedtime can help to promote relaxation.
- Fine motor skill activities such as jigsaws and colouring can be very relaxing and a great activity to do together.
- Massage can help some children to unwind.
- Classical music can be very soothing and makes perfect background music in the evening.
- Teach your child to progressively relax the muscles in their body. They can begin by tensing their feet to the count of 5 and then letting them become relaxed. Work up to the calf muscles, thighs and so on until they have relaxed each part of their body.
- Encourage your child to concentrate on their breathing and imagine breathing in a beautiful white light and blowing out any worries or troubles each time they exhale.
- There are a number of relaxation CDs on the market that may help your child to feel calmer during the evening. You may however wish to talk them through an imaginary scene such as a favourite trip to the beach, asking them to visualise the scene and to feel the warm sun on their face.



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Sleep & Diet

What your child consumes during the day may have an impact on their ability to sleep at night.

Here are some interesting facts:

Caffeine is a stimulant so best avoided in the run up to bedtime. It is not only present in tea and coffee but can also be found in hot chocolate and fizzy drinks.

Fruit and natural fruit juice contains sugar which can give children a rush of energy if consumed too close to bedtime.

Tryptophan is an essential amino acid that helps us to sleep and is naturally present in dairy products, turkey and oats. So it is true . . . warm milk can help you to sleep!

A light snack as part of the bedtime routine can be helpful. Eating a heavy meal before bed can make it difficult to get comfortable. A well planned supper time can be beneficial, particularly for younger children who may be having their last meal early.

Melatonin is the natural hormone that we produce when it gets dark and helps us to feel sleepy at night time. Some foods contain melatonin including bananas! The research around the amounts and its impact on sleep are still rather vague but bananas also contain magnesium which does help to relax muscles.

Cherry juice has been found to contain melatonin too and research suggests that consuming before bedtime can aid sleep.

Cereal can be a healthy supper time choice but check those sugar content levels.

