

Quick guide – bedtimes

Sleep is the time for restoration and for children's bodies to recharge and retain the information they have learned throughout the day. Establishing and maintaining good sleep habits helps your child fall asleep, stay asleep, and wake up rested and refreshed.



Why might children struggle at bedtimes?

Bedtime marks the start of the longest separation a child will have from its parents...this may lead to them struggling with their separation anxiety. What happens if they need us? Preparation is key here. *“When might you need me in the night? What would you do? Do you need a nightlight in the corridor? What would make you feel safe?”*

Some may also feel as though they require more ‘free time’ or connection time with their parents whilst others may suffer with intrusive thoughts. When the house is still and quiet and there are minimal distractions, this may be the time for a child to start listening to their ‘inner critic’ and the worries of that day come to the surface.

What can we do to improve the bedtime routines?

Assess the sleep environment

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been struggling to get to sleep, I want to help so we’re going to go through a checklist to make sure you are feeling safe and comfortable...”

Allowing your child to be part of this process allows them to feel listened to and their feelings are acknowledged and validated.

- Too hot/too cold?
- Bed comfortable?
- Dark/light enough?
- Quiet enough/need white noise?
- Distractions?
- Is there something we could do to make your room feel more comfortable?

Routine

A clear, consistent, calming routine is the first step in tackling any bedtime battles. There may be pushback at the start (this is expected!) but children soon learn that the expectations and boundaries are there to stay. Start by setting a reasonable bedtime that is the same every night, including on the weekends. Thanks to the circadian rhythm, a reliable schedule actually helps the body know when to fall asleep. A consistent schedule has the added benefit of limiting a child's pleas for a later bedtime!

Sleep cycles

A typical sleep cycle lasts for around 90 minutes. After this time, we will have a mini-wake up. This is an in-built system designed to allow us to scan our environment for dangers/threats – a gift from our cave-man ancestors! If a child's environment has changed, even slightly, they are very likely to wake up fully.



Therefore, the guidance is to keep the sleep environment the **same** throughout the night. If a child needs to white noise, the TV on, an audiobook etc to help them settle, try keeping that on throughout the night.

Visual checklist

Certain repeated actions can trigger a body's sleep response making it easier to get children to cooperate. A visual checklist, which they have tick off, may be helpful. Of course, for the odd exception where we stay up late, some flexibility is necessary and this can be clearly communicated.

Shift, Snuggle, Snooze

Start off with a **shift** activity which tells your brain that it time for bed e.g. tidy up toys, some mindfulness meditation, yoga poses, saying goodnight to the pets.

Snuggle activities help you to feel safe and relaxed and this is what you do once you are in bed to help you settle to sleep e.g. reading, listening to an audiobook, enjoying some relaxing music, writing your thoughts in a journal, telling a parent/carer what you are thankful for.

Your **snooze** activity is the thing that happens when you are finding your favourite position to get ready to sleep and close your eyes e.g. hug+kiss, bedtime affirmations, 'I am still, I am calm', gratitude/thankful lists.

When-Then strategy

This tool helps motivate kids to complete the more mundane parts of their bedtime routine they may dislike. For example, we can say:

*"Connor, **when** you've flossed your teeth, **then** I can read you a bedtime story before bed."*

*"Evie, **when** you've taken a shower, **then** you can listen to your music until lights out."*

They're also more likely to complete the tasks relatively quickly because they want to get to the things they enjoy!

Timer trick

Visual timers can help even the youngest children conceptualize time, *"In 10 minutes, I get to say goodnight to you have a have a hug before lights out."*

Playful redirection

By using playful humour, we can re-word our instructions...especially for younger children.

"Up the stairs now" ---- "I bet you can't beat me upstairs!"

"Time for bathtime." ---- "Where's that bubble bath? How many bubbles can we make?"

Take Time for Training

It's easy to forget that seemingly simple tasks may not be simple for our children so they may require guidance, modelling and lots of positive reinforcement..

If we take a little time upfront to teach our children what we *expect* from them, it will save us time and effort later.

Quality time

By providing this huge dose of positive attention proactively, you'll drastically reduce the connection-seeking behaviours you may see just before bed. As busy parents, it can be incredibly difficult to find that time but it will be time 'well-spent' as that child would have had their 'attention bucket' filled before lights out. If we can give children a good dose of TLC, it can work wonders for a child's need for attention and a sense of security.

Get them involved/have ownership

By allowing children a little control, they will have that sense of autonomy which may help them comply to the instructions given:

“Would you like the blue or the red pyjamas?”

“It’s wind down time, would you like to dim the lights?”

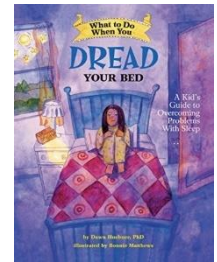
“What mellow music should we play tonight?”

“I’ve got three books, which one should we read first?”

Books

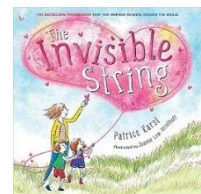
‘What to do when you dread your bed?’ by Dawn Huebner

Fears, busy brains, restless bodies, and overdependence on parents are all tackled as children gain the skills they need for more peaceful nights. This interactive self-help book is the complete resource for educating, motivating, and empowering children to fall asleep and stay asleep.



‘The Invisible String’ by Patrice Karst

The Invisible String offers a very simple approach to overcoming loneliness, separation, or loss with an imaginative twist that children easily understand and embrace



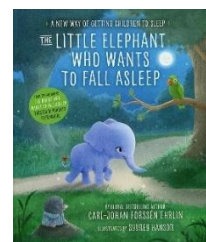
‘Sleep Tight! Mindful Kids’ by Dr. Sharie Coombes

This book includes fun, simple and encouraging activities to help children explore their emotions, behaviour and experiences of resting and sleeping well.



‘The Little Elephant who wants to fall asleep’ by Carl-Johan Forssén Ehrlin and Sydney Hanson

Your child joins Ellen the Elephant on a journey through a magical forest that leads to sleep. Along the way, children meet different fantastical characters and have calming experiences that will help your child to relax and slip into slumber quickly.



‘Even Superheroes Have to Sleep’ by Sara Crow

This book shows children that sleep is a necessity for everyone, even caped heroes, princesses, doctors, and construction workers.

