

# Children's sleep difficulties



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)**

# **Sleep difficulties in children**

## **Introduction**

If your child is having sleep problems, then you are not alone. Many children have difficulties with their sleep for a while.

Typical problems include:

- Falling asleep on the sofa or in parents' bed
- Crying at bedtime
- Getting up out of bed after bedtime
- Waking during the night and being unable to get back to sleep
- Falling asleep too early or too late
- Being sleepy and irritable during the day.

The good news is that nearly all of these can be improved with some hard work and patience!

Many parents say that they have 'tried everything' and indeed they have often had a go at several methods of dealing with the problem. Usually, however, each approach was tried for only a few nights before the parents gave up through tiredness or the feeling that their plan was not going to work.

In this booklet we will be suggesting that you stick to your plan for a much longer period.

## **Rule out medical problems**

First of all, check with your doctor that there is nothing medically wrong with your child that could be causing the sleeping difficulty. Any illness could, of course, make your child uncomfortable and unable to sleep.

## **Normal sleep patterns**

Before talking about sleep problems, we will first take a look at normal sleep.

Although every child is different, this table will give an idea of how much sleep most children need at different ages:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Hours of sleep (some in naps)</b>
6 months	14.25
1 year	13.75
3 years	12.00
5 years	11.00
7 years	10.50
9 years	10.00
11 years	9.50
13 years	9.25

Sleep studies have shown that all of us have periods of deep sleep followed by lighter sleep. The two alternate throughout the night. Every 1.5 hours or so, we wake briefly, check that all is well (that the duvet is still covering us, that there are no worrying noises, etc) then turn over and go back to sleep again.

Although the day is 24 hours long, our bodies would like it to be 25 hours! If we never looked at a clock, and went to bed and got up when we felt like it, our bedtime would tend to get an hour later every day. We have to 'reset' our body clock every day to 24 hours by having a **routine**. This is especially important with children.

We aren't born knowing when and where to sleep. It has to be taught to children. They won't develop a good sleep pattern on their own, but only with your help.

## **Sleep triggers**

The best chance of falling asleep for most people is:

1. In a quiet place
2. In the dark
3. In bed.

We all know how hard it can be to sleep in other places where it is light and noisy, or perhaps when we are sitting up on a bus or plane. So for us, the 'triggers' for sleep are **peace, dark and bed**.

If you wake briefly at night, there's usually not much problem about going back to sleep if it is still dark, quiet and you are still in bed.

Many sleep problems arise in children because they have learned the wrong sleep triggers. The child who can only fall asleep if he is on the sofa with the TV on has these triggers: **sofa** and **TV**. Even so, the light and noise will make it hard to fall asleep under these conditions. His parents probably carry him up to bed once he drops off, but when he wakes during the night (probably every hour and a half or so) he will check to see if everything is OK. It is not, because he does not have his sleep triggers of **sofa** and **TV**. He will not be able to fall asleep again without them, and will get up.

Imagine a baby who is always rocked to sleep in his mother's arms. When he wakes in the night, he needs his trigger (**mother's arms**) to get him to sleep again - thus making for a very disturbed night for the mother!

Both these children have the wrong triggers. They need to be able to fall asleep by themselves and in bed (**Alone, Dark, Quiet and Bed**) so that when they wake at night they will find their triggers still present, and will be able to get off to sleep again.

## **How to establish good sleep triggers**

The first step is to have a good *bedtime routine*. It should involve a winding down period, maybe a bath, possibly a story, kiss and a goodbye. You can make up your own routine, but a typical one might look like this:

**7pm:** Quiet play (not too exciting or frightening) and drink/snack

**7.30pm:** Bath / put on pyjamas

**7.45pm:** Into bed and possibly story

**8pm** Tuck in, say goodnight, turn out light and leave room.

The purpose of a routine is to give lots of clues that bedtime is near, to enable the child to calm down ready for sleep, and to establish the right triggers.

The next step is to stick to your guns no matter how much your child cries in bed. Don't be tempted to give in and rock him, or allow him to come down to lie on the sofa or in your bed (all the old triggers).

If there is lots of crying after you leave the room, then do not leave your child to cry for ages. Instead, we want to be reassuring but firm. So, **wait five minutes** before going in. Reassure your child, tuck him in again, say: 'it's time to sleep, bye-bye, see you in the morning' in a firm voice then **leave**.

Remember, you're trying to teach your child how to fall asleep alone and in bed. If the crying goes on, wait another five minutes and go in again. Repeat as often as necessary but **don't give in**. Don't be tempted to read more stories, get him up for a little play or let him watch TV for a bit.

Just stay calm - getting angry will only make sleep even less likely and continue putting him back to bed in a determined but kindly way. Be boring so that he will realise you are not going to provide any fun after bedtime!

If he gets up then simply take him back to bed. Do this calmly but firmly and repeat it as many times as necessary. You might have to do it 20 times (or more!). Most parents find that the first night they try this with a child who is used to getting up, the child is very annoyed and gets up dozens of times. The first night will probably be awful, the second is sometimes worse, but the third is usually lots better.

Even if you have to be up half the night, it's worth having two or three terrible nights in order to teach your child good sleep habits in the long run. If both parents are around, try to take turns at putting your child back to bed so he sees that you are united in determination!

Maybe it would be best to start this at a weekend when sleep is less crucial, and maybe even think about sending other children to stay with relatives for a night or two. Get yourself a good book or magazine, a mug of coffee, and be prepared to stay up yourself so that you can supervise the plan.

## **Feeding at night**

After about three months old, children don't really **need** food during the night. If your child is waking at night and expecting food, this is learned hunger, not need hunger.

It may be that:

1. Your child's body expects food and wakes for it
2. Sucking may be a sleep trigger for your child.

Drinking a lot at night can interfere with sleep in other ways. For example, nappies will be wetter and may wake a child due to discomfort. Also, the body can't settle into sleep if its body clock is expecting food.

**Solution:** Try to fade out the night-time feeds by:

1. Giving less in each bottle
2. Giving feeds further apart.

At the same time, try to teach new sleep triggers (see above). For older children, try to fade out any snacks and drinks you give them during the night. If they are thirsty, a drink of water will do.

## **Irregular sleeping times**

Some children seem to have no pattern to their sleep. They fall asleep early one night, late the next and have naps and meals at different times every day. These children have not been helped to establish a regular body clock rhythm and their systems don't know when to be asleep or awake. They are just like tiny babies who follow no pattern at first.

A child like this may not be able to sleep at a 'normal' bedtime - not because he's being difficult but because his body is not ready for a 'sleep phase'. It would be like asking you to fall asleep at 11am when you are up and about and busy with things.

**Solution:** Run your child's life with military precision, having meal times, naps and sleep at the same time every day. This will help to 'set' the child's body clock to more normal settings. Your child may have trouble fitting in with this at first - indeed he almost certainly will - but it is only by sticking to the routine that he will learn to adjust to it.

So, have meals at fixed times, bedtime at the same time each night, and get your child up at the same time each morning (yes, weekends too).

If you allow a child to go to bed late on a Friday and sleep late the next morning, his body clock will start to drift again. If it is night-time but he is not sleepy insist that he stays in bed anyway and does quiet things. Before long his body clock will allow him to sleep at night.

## **Enough sleep at the wrong times**

If a child sleeps enough hours at a time, but is going to bed very early or very late, then the problem is one of having to shift his body clock a little bit. If he goes to bed very early the chances are that meal times are early too, and naps.

**Solution:** To shift his sleep phase a bit later, make everything about the daily routine a little later - say 10 minutes later each day until you arrive at the times you want. So, the routine stays the same, but it all happens at slightly different times (including getting up, meals, naps, snacks, bedtime, etc).

For a child with a late bedtime that you want to make earlier, shift everything about the daily routine 10 minutes earlier every day. This includes waking up time too. This is such a small change that the child won't notice it much on a daily basis, but if you are firm about it, then his body clock will shift gradually.

## **Nightmares**

These are fairly common in most children and are thought to be related in some way to worries that the child has during the day. These worries may be connected with being separated from parents, about scary videos, or about whether the child is loved. (Of course most children are dearly loved, but some still worry whether it is really true).

**Solution:** If your child only has a nightmare occasionally, then all that is needed is a hug and a few quiet words. If the nightmares are frequent, try to find out what may be bothering the child during the day by listening carefully and providing the opportunities to talk. Ask for professional help if you are worried about nightmares in your child.

## **Night terrors, sleepwalking and sleeptalking**

When we first fall asleep, we go into a phase of deep sleep lasting for one or two hours, then we make quite a rapid transition to wakefulness for a short period before quickly dropping off again.

In children, whose brains are still maturing, this transition is not always smooth. Sometimes the body seems to 'get into gear' when the mind is still 'disengaged'. This can lead to walking and talking and sometimes to wild thrashing about and screaming, and often happens about 1.5 to two hours after bedtime, although it can happen later.

The child can be sweating and have a racing heart. This can look very frightening to an adult, but in fact you can't seem to comfort the child and he doesn't even seem to know you are there. It will last about 10-20 minutes after which the child wakes and is calm. He will quickly go back to sleep again.

**Solution:** Do not try to wake the child. Stay with him while it runs its course. When the child wakes, don't ask what he was 'dreaming about' - it was not a dream and he will have no idea what you are talking about. If you help him back to bed, he will very quickly fall asleep again. In the morning he will remember nothing about it.

These partial wakings can occur in children up to the age of about five or six years. If they persist much beyond that, ask for advice - it may be related to worries in an older child.

## **Final words**

Use lots of praise and rewards when your child is able to make the changes you want. For example, if you want him to stay in bed after you put him there, you could:

1. Praise him
2. Give a small treat the next morning
3. Mark his success on a chart with a tick, star, flower, spaceship, etc
4. Allow him to save up 'ticks' towards buying a bigger reward.

For more information about using praise and rewards, ask for the leaflet in this series called 'Encouraging Good Behaviour'.

- If you are going to try changing your child's sleep, then stick to your plan carefully and calmly. Many problems require a consistent approach, not chopping and changing approaches every few days. It might take a while to change things but don't give up
- If you want further help, ask the person who gave you this leaflet.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained from:

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