GENERAL TIPS

Teach your child to fall asleep on his own

Reward good night time behaviour

Decide on a bedtime and stick to it

Establish a bedtime routine and use it every night

Put your child to bed while he is still awake

Try not to let your child have any naps

Try not to give night time drinks

Try to avoid taking your child into your bed for sleep

Try to be as 'boring' as possible when dealing with your child in the night

REMEMBER
If you change an old habit, your child may get a little worse at first while he tests out the new rules. Changing old habits may take time. However, if you set the limits and are firm and consistent, problems will start to get better.

RESEARCH AUTISM
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE

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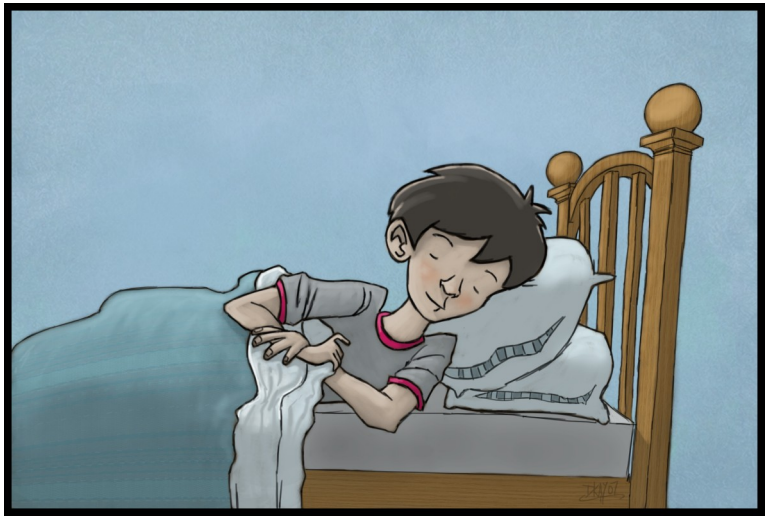
Encouraging Good Sleep Habits



Please note:

Throughout this book, to keep it simple, children are referred to as boys and described as ‘he’ or ‘him’. If your child is a girl, please read ‘she’ and ‘her’ instead of ‘he’ and ‘him’.

DAYTIME NAPS

After the age of three, most children do not need to nap during the day. If your child is sleeping during the day try to cut out daytime naps otherwise your child will not be tired enough to go to sleep in the early evening. Travelling to and from school in a car/taxi/bus can be a time when some children nap. If you think that this is the case check with the driver and see if something can be done to try and keep your child awake during the journey (supplying a snack can help to keep him awake!).

REWARDING GOOD BEHAVIOUR AT NIGHT

Rewards are a good way of helping your child to do what you want him to do whether at bedtime or at other times of day. These rewards can be cuddles or praise, small toys or stickers or activities with you, such as visits to somewhere your child enjoys. You should try to think about the sorts of rewards your child would like best.

It is important that your child:

- Knows how to get the reward
- Is rewarded every time he behaves as you want him to
- Is rewarded as soon as possible

Once you give a reward it should never be taken away. Most children respond best if you show that you are pleased with them (verbally or by touching or stroking if appropriate), but for some children other things such as a snack or stickers might work better.

Many children like star charts. This means you will have to make a calendar with the days of the week. Each day your child achieves his goal he is given a star. These charts work best if they are placed in the house where everyone can see them and are shown to people who come to the house.

Goals can be very simple at first (eg. going to bedroom with parents when asked to go) and gradually become more demanding (eg. staying in bed once settled to sleep, staying in bed once parents have left the room, staying in bedroom all night etc).

All children are different. Some settle very quickly into a sleep routine, while others may take some time. Fortunately, these problems can be helped by the types of ideas which will be described in this booklet. There is a great deal of research which shows that this advice *is* helpful for children with learning disabilities even when the sleep problems are severe or have been going on for several years. These techniques work for toddlers, young children and teenagers alike.

WHAT IS A PROBLEM?

A child's sleep pattern is only a problem if it is a problem for you or your child. You may not mind spending several hours comforting your child who cannot sleep but your child may be tired or overactive (both signs of lack of sleep) the next day. In this case, the sleep pattern is a problem for the child. Or, you may not mind that your child sleeps in your bed but you would mind if he was still sleeping in your bed in a few years time. In this case, the sleep pattern may become a problem for you.

Sometimes it can be difficult for parents and their children to be apart at night. This can be for many reasons but may be particularly likely if you have anxieties about your child's health. It may help you to feel less anxious if you remember:

- Your child will feel more alert and happy if he is getting a good night's sleep
- Your child gets enough attention and love from you in the daytime and does not need any more during the night
- You deserve (and need!) some time for yourself to recharge your batteries
- You will both enjoy each other's company a lot more if you have slept well

WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOKLET?

The techniques in this booklet have been found to be helpful by many parents of children with and without learning disabilities. They do work.

Sleep habits need to be learned. This booklet suggests ways in which you can teach your child good sleep habits. They are based on a few simple points. These are:

Children will learn that different behaviours lead to different things. They will learn to link behaviours so that they know what is going to happen next and will learn to expect certain things to happen (e.g. if they cry at night and a parent goes and hugs them, they will expect all cries to end with a parent hugging them).

If a particular behaviour is 'rewarded' in some way it is more likely to happen again. A reward can be anything that a child finds pleasant, such as praise, a drink, a hug or attention. Even the attention of a tired and irritable parent can be more rewarding than nothing! When trying to encourage a piece of behaviour it is best to start by rewarding something simple that the child can do (e.g. getting into bed) so that they can learn to earn a reward. Try to watch out for times when he is doing something right that you can reward.

To begin with, the desired behaviour needs to be rewarded every time. Once the behaviour is well-established, the rewards can be given less often and gradually stopped. There is a section of this leaflet about doing this.

If a certain type of behaviour is 'ignored', it is less likely to happen again. For many children, ignoring them is even less of a reward than punishment. Remember even punishment involves giving attention. If you try to pay as little attention as possible at night time you will be less rewarding for your child.

CHILDREN WHO WANT TO SLEEP IN YOUR BED

Some parents feel quite happy to have their child in bed with them, but it is one of the best ways of rewarding night waking! If you take your child into your bed when he cries, he will quickly learn to like it, and this will develop into a habit. When your child is older and bigger, you may not be quite so happy to have him sharing your bed with you.

If your child wakes at night, try to soothe and settle him in his own bed.

Do not take your child into bed with you to stop him crying. If you do, he will learn that the more he cries, the more likely it is that you will take him into your bed. If he comes into your bed while you are asleep, it may help to attach a bell to your door to wake you as he comes in. You must then put your child back into his own bed every time.

Remember, one of the most important lessons you can teach your child is to fall asleep on his own.

WHAT IF THE CRYING STARTS AGAIN?

Try to leave it a minute or two before going back in, then settle him down again as before. It is important that you do not cuddle him until he goes back to sleep because this could develop into a bad habit. But, if your child is unwell, he may need soothing and extra comfort. Be careful not to interact too much though as this will be a hard habit to break when he is better.

Sometimes it is not practical to leave your child to cry for more than a minute or two because it will disturb other people in the family, especially if he gets up and moves around the house. If this is the case, stay in the room until he goes back to sleep. It is essential that you are not tempted to chat with him. Try to soothe your child in his own bed by patting, a brief stroke or a quick comfort cuddle and then leave him alone again. As before, remember that once you have settled your child for sleep you should try to be boring and avoid all further conversation, playing, and even eye-contact!

When your child has learnt to settle to sleep alone in the evening they will be less likely to need you there to help them to resettle if they wake in the night. However, sometimes you might need to use the techniques (described on page 8) again, during the nightime.

So, by changing your response, you can change your child's behaviour. Three tips are worth bearing in mind:

1) Be consistent. Your child will learn most quickly if you behave in the same way every time (e.g. have the same bedtime routine every night, or, resettle him back to sleep in the same way every time he wakes).

2) If possible, try to give rewards (or punishments) *at the time* when the child's behaviour occurs, otherwise the child will have forgotten what they are being rewarded (or punished) for.

3) Try to be firm. Sound as if you believe that your child can settle to sleep alone and he will know that you 'mean business'.

BEDTIME ROUTINE

A bedtime routine is important because it teaches your child the order of events leading up to bedtime. Try to choose a short routine which suits you and your child. You could perhaps include: having a bath, putting on pyjamas, having a drink, brushing teeth and reading a story or singing/ listening to music.

Choose activities that are relaxing so that your child realises it is time for sleep. A bedtime routine should not include lively games, television or using computers.

The bedtime routine should last about 20 minutes to half an hour. It should include a definite end-point, something that your child can learn to associate with falling asleep. This may be turning off the light or you saying goodnight to your child. Many parents find it helpful to have a 'goodnight phrase', (eg "Goodnight, sleep tight, see you in the morning"). This is a little phrase that they can say every night just as they leave their child to settle to sleep. This is the last thing you say to your child every night and the signal to them that it's now time to settle down for sleep.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD WAKES DURING THE NIGHT

When a child wakes regularly during the night it can be tiring and upsetting for the whole family. Below are some things you could try to overcome this problem.

Check to see if there is anything causing him to be upset:

- Is he ill?
- Is he too warm or too cold?
- Does he have a wet or dirty nappy/bed?
- Might he be worried about something?

Try to let your child resettle himself. If you need to intervene, resettle him as you did at bedtime. If he is really upset it may be necessary to give a brief cuddle but do not allow him to go to sleep in your arms or in your bed. You may need to resettle him often at first but it is extremely important that he realises the right place to be asleep is in his own bed alone.

If you think a drink is necessary, try a few sips of water (not milk, juice or anything else).

If, when you put him into bed, your child settles happily, you can leave the room. If he starts to cry, go in after 5 minutes (less if the crying upsets you) and gently but firmly resettle him with as little touching as possible and repeat your ‘goodnight phrase’. Leave him again.

If your child comes out of his bedroom take him immediately back to his bed and gently, but firmly, resettle him. Repeat your ‘goodnight phrase’ and leave again. If he comes out again, just repeat this.

Alternatively, if your child will not settle without you there every few days you can gradually increase the distance between you and your child (e.g. lie beside your child without cuddles, sit on the bed, stand beside bed, stand a bit away, stand in the door, stand outside the door etc.) until he no longer needs you to be there for him to fall asleep.

Whichever technique you use, remember that once you have settled your child for sleep try to avoid all further conversation, playing, even eye-contact! Be boring! Only repeat your goodnight phrase, as needed, to let your child know it’s time for sleep.

CHANGING THE TIMES WHEN YOUR CHILD SLEEPS

If you are trying to move your child’s bedtime (to make it earlier or later) a bedtime routine will help you to do this. Move the routine (either forwards or backwards) by about 15 minutes each night. This gradual approach will be easier than changing your child’s bedtime by a large amount of time in one evening.

Children who fall asleep very late or very early sometimes have a problem with their body-clock being set at the wrong time. Here are some things you can try to help keep your child’s body-clock set at the same time as everyone else’s.

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Many children who can't fall asleep until late tend to sleep-in when they get the chance to do so (eg. at the weekends). This is not a good idea as it just makes it even more likely that your child won't be able to go to sleep until later the following evening. Try to have a fixed get-up time that you stick to during the week and at weekends too. If you do this for a couple of weekends you should begin to see that your child starts to fall asleep earlier in the evening. Encouraging your child to get lots of natural light in the morning and avoiding too much bright light in the early afternoon and evening should also help. To do this you could try encouraging your child to eat breakfast sitting in the garden or by a window, walking to school etc. To avoid light, without staying indoors your child could wear sunglasses!

Less commonly some children fall asleep too early and wake up too early. Here, you can encourage your child to fall asleep later by exposing them to bright light in the late afternoon and early evening and avoiding light in the morning. Commonly, children who wake up early also eat breakfast early. As you gradually move your child's bedtime routine later by 15 minutes each night also try to gradually delay your child's breakfast time the following morning.

SETTLING YOUR CHILD TO SLEEP

Try to ensure that your child can learn that there is a clear difference between day and night. If you can, provide a peaceful, calm atmosphere with subdued light at night in his bedroom. Also, try to show your child that you are different at night: that you are quieter and less willing to have a lot of contact or conversation (although you love them just as much).

If he is due to sleep, try to put him down to sleep when he is drowsy but awake. Although some children may want you to be in their room/ bed while they settle to sleep, or to do so whilst watching TV, if you can teach him to fall asleep on his own, without any assistance, you will be setting up good sleep habits for the future.

Adults and children move between light and deep sleep during the course of a night. In the very light phase of sleep, we are almost awake and anything different in our surroundings will waken us fully. So, you should not cuddle him to sleep because if he wakes in the night he will expect you to be there to give him a cuddle. If he fell asleep in front of the TV he will be surprised to wake in the night and find it turned off. If things have changed between when he fell asleep and woke in the night he will understandably get distressed and not settle until everything is as it was when he went to sleep.