

## Sleep workbook

It's the middle of the night and your child is still awake. Now it's early morning and your child is still not asleep. As you watch the clock you may be feeling very alone. Whilst this can feel like an incredibly lonely time it's important to know that you are not alone, many parents across the country are in same position as you – asking the question 'why won't my child sleep'. Sleep problems in children are very common.

Here's the good news. There is a lot that you can do to help! In this workbook will be discuss tips to help increase the likelihood that your child will feel tired and ready to sleep when it comes to bedtime. We will also discuss strategies that you can use to help your child learn to sleep through the night. 'Learning' is a really important word here – when a child is learning something new it takes time. This means you will need to patient, keep going and don't give up! These tips and strategies have been found to be very helpful for children of all ability levels (this includes children with ADHD, ASD or Learning Disabilities).



### **How we sleep**

All humans have short periods during the night in which we wake up. As a species we have learned to have these short wakings just to check that we are safe and its okay for us to go back to sleep. We often do not even remember these short waking in the morning. To feel comfortable to go back to sleep we need our environment to be just as we left it. If there are big changes then our brains tell us that something is wrong – we become startled and then it's hard to go back to sleep .

Imagine that tonight you go to sleep in your bed and in the middle of the night you wake in the middle of the kitchen floor? How would you feel? Now imagine what it must be like for a child who has fallen asleep on the sofa and wakes to find themselves alone in their bed? Our brains learn to associate routines and environments with either being asleep or a wake. Good sleep

associations involve giving your child lots of cues that it's time to go to sleep. When your child wakes at night they will also look for these cues to tell them that it's safe for them to go back to sleep. So the same things/ people need to be available both at bedtime and when they wake during the night.

### **The importance of consistency**

Consistency is one of the most important principles of helping change any behaviour - this includes your child's sleep. Children benefit from routines and structure. They then do not have to worry about what will happen as they know what to expect. Whilst children need consistency they also have lots of things that they want or think that they need. Most parents know that consistency is important but have had the experience of giving in when they were tired or overwhelmed. When you 'give in' your child gets the message that you are not serious when you say 'no' and if they ask enough times, scream or cry loud that they you will change your mind. Although being consistent can be very difficult it is the key to the follow tips and strategies working to help your child learn to sleep.

### **Tips to promote your child feeling ready to sleep at bedtime**

#### **Food and drink**

Caffeine interferes with sleep. Caffeine is contained in coffee, tea, coke drinks and in chocolate. Caffeine can stay in the system for several hours so avoid your child having caffeine from afternoon onwards.



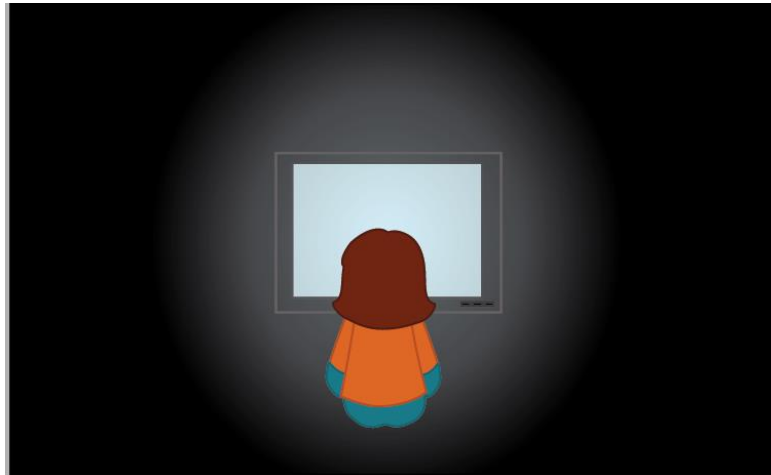
Protein based foods promote sleep. Having a snack before bedtime such as cereal with milk or cheese and crackers can help your child feel sleepy.

#### **Good routines**

Your child's bedtime routine is very important. A good routine helps your child wind down and understand that it's time for bed. The following tips can help improve your child's sleep routines:

- After tea-time, allow free play for an hour, followed by quiet play for 20 minutes.

- Avoid any stimulating activities in the hour before bed. This means no use of screens (tablets, phones, games consoles or television) as the light from these screens stimulates the brain. This also means avoiding physically



- stimulating activities such as wrestling with your child right before bedtime. It can be helpful to encourage a child to do a relaxing activity such as colouring in at this time.
- Use cues to signal bedtime, such as closing the curtains, or playing a set piece of music each time.
- Sometimes parents have their children put on their pyjamas several hours before bedtime or their children clean their teeth and then go back to watching television. It can be more helpful for getting changed and tooth brushing to be part of the final steps in the bedtime routine so that your child associates these activities with sleep rather than fun.
- Having the same bedtime and waking times each day (even on weekends) can help establish a clear routine – again consistency is important.

### **Associating being in bed with sleep**

Due to your child's problems with sleep they may not have learnt to associate their beds with sleep. To help them to do this it can be useful for their beds to be used just for sleep – so if they want to play they can sit in a chair in their room or on the floor.

Another important part of learning to associate sleep and bed is making sure that your child is tired when they go to bed – this increases the chance that they will sleep. Good routines and exercise can help. Look out for cues that your child is becoming sleepy e.g. droopy eyelids, slowed movements etc. You want to be sending your child to bed at this time. If bedtime is too late then your child will have gone past the 'sleepy point' and will be overtired. They may become irritable or hyperactive and their bodies are no longer ready for sleep. If bedtime is too early then your child may be lying awake and this gets in the way of the associating their beds with sleep.

## Is my child active enough during the day?



Some parents notice that their child sleeps better when they have had a busy outing or have been playing in the park. Our activity levels during the day can have a big impact on our sleep at night. So trying to get daily exercise into your child's routine can be extremely helpful. This can be difficult for children who have very limited interests and like to spend most of their time indoors playing on tablets or phones. It can be helpful to try experimenting with different types of activities such as attending afterschool/ weekend sports clubs in your local area.

*Ask yourself – is my child active enough? What activities do they do on a daily basis? If your child is underactive what physical activities might they be interested in?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Is my child napping during the day?



Most children over the age of 3 no longer need a daytime nap. Children who sleep poorly at night can sometimes fall into the habit of napping to manage their tiredness. Sometimes parents allow or even encourage this to happen for several reasons:

- because they are worried about the dangers of the child not getting enough sleep
- because their child gets emotional and difficult to manage if they do not nap
- because when the child is napping it finally gives the parent a chance to get some much needed rest

These reasons are all understandable but in the long-term napping is likely to be contributing to your child not sleeping at night as they may not feel tired at bedtime.

### ***What you can do?***

Try to eliminate napping. If you notice there is a particular time that your child tends to nap then try changing their routine so that they are doing something to wake them up at this time. This might involve having a snack or getting some exercise.

If you are finding it very difficult to get rid of the napping you can gradually reduce the amount of time you allow your child to nap e.g. if they usually nap for an hour shorten this by 15 minutes (a 45 minute nap). After your child has gotten used to this you can shorten the nap again by another 15 minutes. Continue with this pattern until your child is no longer napping.

*If your child is taking naps, ask yourself – what time do they nap and how long for? What could they be doing instead at this time to keep them awake?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Are family routines disturbing my child’s sleep?**

Sometimes children can find it hard to sleep if there is a lot of activity going on around them. They can feel left out and curious about what others are doing. They may also find the noises that they hear distracting. Some children share a room with their siblings and it can be difficult for younger children to sleep if their older brothers or sisters are using the room for other purposes at the same time e.g. chatting on their phones/ doing homework. Try to think if there are other places that your other children can complete their activities.

*Ask yourself what are other people in the house are doing at your child’s bedtime? If these activities might be distracting for your child are there changes that others could make so that the house is quieter/ less active at this time.*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### *Environment and comfort levels*

Go and sit down in the room where your child goes to sleep – this might be in their room or for some families it might be somewhere else such as the living room. Now think about what it might be like for your child sleeping here during the night.



### *Light*

You may have heard of melatonin – the hormone that helps prepare the body for sleep. Bright light interferes with our melatonin levels. If there is too much light in the room heavier curtains or black out blinds might help. For children who have a habit of pulling down curtains you can buy blackout blinds that you can stick to the window at night which use suckers or Velcro.

Sometimes children are scared of the dark. Leaving a dim light on overnight might help (this should not be light from the television, a tablet or a phone as these lights can be stimulating for the brain).

### *Noise*

This could be noise from outside such as a busy road. However some children are particularly sensitive to noises that you might not usually notice such as a dripping tap or ticking clock.

Some children like to have a fan on at night not only because it keeps them cool but also because they find the repetitive noise soothing and it blocks out other noise. Alternative you can try using a white noise or pink noise app on a phone or laptop. White noise or pink noise are sounds produced by combining lots of different frequencies together. This can be used to mask other sounds that might interfere with your child's sleep and the noise itself can be quite calming (it sounds similar to heavy rain falling). These apps can be used to play noise all through the night. Remember to keep phones/ laptops used at night out of reach of your children and turn off the lights when they are in use.

Some children find silence distressing or boring and might want to make noise because of this. Again white noise or pink noise can help here.

### *Temperature*

If your child might be too hot or cold consider changing the room temperature by adding a fan/ turning up the heating as well as considering whether your child is wearing the right nightclothes/ has the right duvet for their needs.

**Physical comfort**

In addition to noticing your child’s sleep environment consider your child’s physical comfort levels. If your child is sensitive to fabrics and labels consider whether this might be affecting their sleep. Some children benefit from seamless pyjamas and underwear as they find these more comfortable (you can buy these online).

*Ask yourself - Is there too much or too little light? Is there too much or too little noise? Is it too hot or too cold? Would my child feel comfortable?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

*If your child’s environment may be affecting their sleep what ideas will you try to help improve this?*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## Strategies to help children learn to sleep

Before considering strategies it's important that you are following the tips in the previous section. The strategies discussed here are to be used in addition to these tips.

### **Problem - My child comes into my room at night**

Your child might start off the night in their own bed and may even fall asleep but then you awake to find them at your bedroom door or even roll over in the morning to find that they have snuck into your bed at night. You might previously have been happy for the child to come into your bed but this may have started to become more of a problem as they have gotten older and bigger.



### *What you can do?*

#### **Option 1: Quick return**

Unless your child is unwell they do not really need you at nighttime. Perhaps you have tried trying to be 'tough' but found that your child has learnt that they can cry, shout, scream etc. to get you to give in and let them sleep in your bed. Your child can however learn to sleep by themselves. To help them to learn this you will need to:

- Know when they have come into your room at night. You can put windchimes or an alarm on your child's door/ your door so that you know when they have left their room. This is important as your response needs to happen quickly.
- When your child comes into your room take them straight back to bed. When doing this give them minimal eye contact and calmly but firmly say 'back to bed' in a neutral voice. This is sometimes called robotic parenting. Parents can fall into the habit of pleading with their child or shouting at them. This often does not work as children can find any kind of attention rewarding (even you shouting at them may feel more interesting than 'boring bed'.) You give your child plenty of attention during the day so you do not need to give them this attention at night also. By being 'robotic' you are reducing the amount of attention your child gets for being out of bed.

- Once your child is back in their room leave them there. If your child comes back into your room again take them straight back. Your child might at first think that this is a game. This is why it's important that you give them minimal attention and that you are consistent. This helps your child learn that you are being serious. Because your child is learning something new it is important to remember that it will take time for them to learn that they can sleep alone. This might mean that at first you are returning your child to their bed many, many times in one night before they start staying in their own bed. When changing behaviours it is common for things to get worse before they get better. Although this can be very tiring stick with it!



### ***Option 2: Bedtime pass***

Using a bedtime pass can be helpful for children who are quite anxious at night. This involves making your child a pass that they can use so that they can come and see you once during the night. To use this method:



- Make a simple pass (this might have a picture of something associated with sleep such as drawing of a child in bed or the moon).
- Explain to your child that the pass can only be used once during the night.
- If your child comes to you with their pass during the night take them back to their room and settle them there. You can tuck them back in and give them a quick hug or a kiss and then say goodnight. Avoid getting into discussions with the child as this gives them too much attention when it's actually time for them to sleep. Make sure you take the bedtime pass away with you.
- If your child returns again to your room use the steps involved in Quick Return (i.e. quickly taking them back to their room this time with no hugs/ kisses/ tucking in – you need to be move into 'robotic parenting' mode). Do this as many times as necessary and be consistent.
- For some children this works very quickly as they quite like to have clear 'rule'. They may even manage to stay in their bed through the night

without using the pass at all as they do not want to 'waste' the one chance to use the pass.

- This method can work very well but is only useful if your child is able to understand how the pass works. For some children this may be too difficult a concept and the Quick Return technique is instead appropriate.

### **WARNING:**

Some parents put locks on their children's doors as they tend to roam the house at night. Whilst it is understandable that you worry about child getting into mischief or even being in danger when unsupervised at night locking them in can be extremely dangerous. In the event of a fire (remember nobody expects a fire will happen to them) people often become quickly overcome by smoke and panic and can forget how to unlock a door. As discussed above adding an alarm or windchime to your child's door will alert you when they are out of bed. It is also fine for you to lock unoccupied rooms at night such as the kitchen (as long as they cannot access to the lock/ key themselves).

### **Problem: My child stays in their bed but gets very upset**

You can use these strategies if your child will not settle without you present or gets upset when you leave the room.

#### *What you can do?*

#### **Option 1: Checking in**

This strategy involves regularly checking in on your child. If your child starts to get upset:

- Leave them for 5 minutes before going in to check on them. When you check on them do not turn the light on - simple say 'it's time to sleep' in a neutral but firm voice and then leave the room.
- If your child continues to be cry wait 10 minutes before you return to check on them. Gradually increase the amount of time before you check in on them until they have stopped crying.
- Do not let your child cry for longer than 50 minutes. If this happens it might be helpful to try a different technique.
- For some families waiting 5 minutes may feel like too long to wait. You might instead wait for example for 3 minutes before checking in the first time and then 6 minutes before checking in a second time and so on. What is important is that you gradually increase the amount of time between check-ins and you stick with these times.



- Over time your child will learn to soothe themselves back to sleep.

### **Option 2: Camping out**

This strategy involves helping your child gradually learn to sleep alone by gradually increasing the physical distance between the two of you.

- This involves in the short term committing to stay in your child's room with them overnight.
- The steps involved will depend on how you have been settling your child. For example, if you have been cuddling them to sleep at night then you might start by lying beside them without cuddling them. When they have gotten used to falling asleep this way you might move to sleeping alongside them in a camp bed. When they have gotten use to this you gradually move the bed away a step at a time until eventually you are sleeping outside the room. Gradually your child comes to understand that they can sleep without your help.
- Again the principle of consistency is important here otherwise you will confuse your child. It is important that you're making *gradual* progress moving away from your child and that your child gets used to each step before you move onto the next.
- This strategy is based on the same core principle that is used to help your child learn to manage any type of anxiety - by breaking their fear down into steps the challenge feels less scary and more achievable.

### **What else might help?**

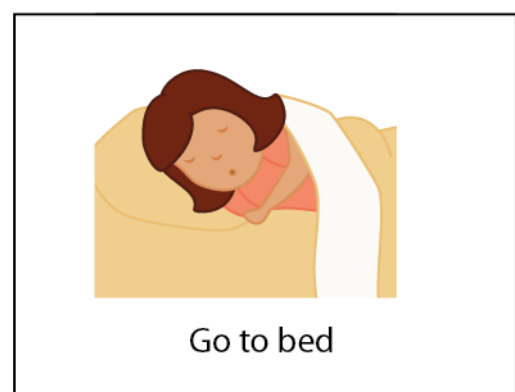
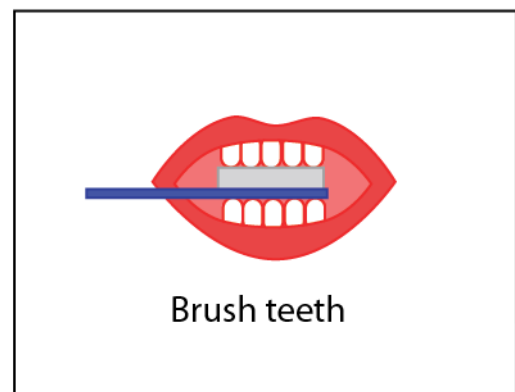
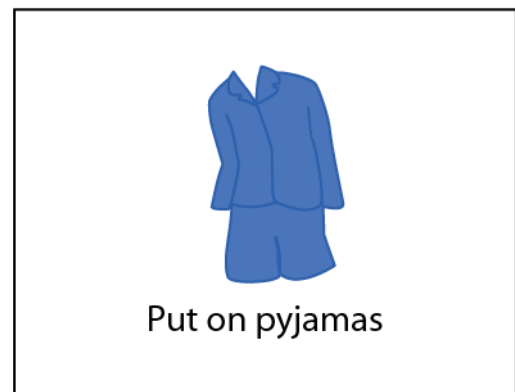
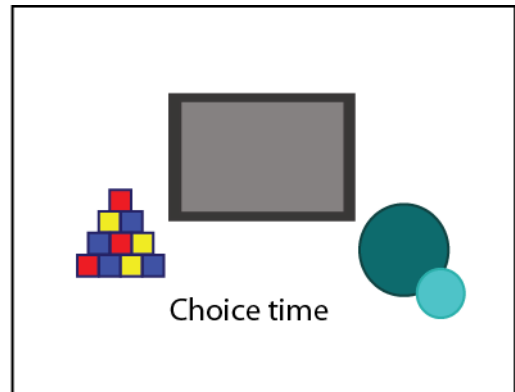
Visual materials can be incredibly useful for lots of children ranging from children who have severe learning disabilities to typically developing children.

### **Reward charts**

Rewards are a great way of encouraging a new behaviour. If your child stays in bed for the night you can reward them in the morning (as none of us can control when we actually fall asleep staying in bed should be rewarded rather than falling asleep). It's important for rewards to be consistent and given as quickly as possible. Rewards often work best when you combine them with your attention e.g. giving your child a hug and lots of praise. A reward chart can help motivate the child to work towards a larger reward e.g. a trip to the cinema, choosing which film to watch at home. Rewards should not be expensive. At first you will need to reward your child daily but as their sleep improves you can change how they are rewarded e.g. rewarding them for staying in their bed for 3 nights in a row, then for 5 nights, then for 7.

### Visual timetables

A visual timetable is a way of helping increase the amount of structure and predictability in your child's routine. You can use this to show your child what they will be doing and in what order. Visual timetables reduce the amount of language you need to use to support your child through their nighttime routine. They can also sometimes reduce arguments as you are following what the schedule 'says' rather than feeling that you are placing demands on them.



***Plan***

Now it's time for you to bring everything together into your child's sleep plan.

What tips and strategies do you plan to use to help your child learn to sleep?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What is already going well with your child's sleep routine?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What problems do you think might come up and how could you manage these?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

We hope that you have found this workbook helpful and wish you all the best with helping your child learn to sleep – remember we are here to help!

This book was written and illustrated by Dr Kelly Wood, Clinical Psychologist  
The ideas discussed in this booklet are further covered in the following books/ resources  
- Sleep Better! A guide to Improving Sleep for Children with Special Needs by V. Mark Durand  
- Encouraging Good Sleep Habits in Children with Learning Disabilities by Dr Paul Montgomery and Dr Lucy Wigg ([https://www.researchautism.net/publicfiles/pdf/good\\_sleep\\_habits.pdf](https://www.researchautism.net/publicfiles/pdf/good_sleep_habits.pdf))