

Sleep Tips:

Very few people do well without enough quality sleep, so getting kids to sleep on a consistent schedule is often an important priority to parents/caregivers. All children are different and have their own distinct needs and preferences that change and setting up a routine that works takes time, commitment and sometimes creativity. It's important to first identify your expectations for your child's sleep and then get a clear understanding of how much sleep your child needs and how you can help them get there.



Parent/Caregiver Tips:

- Play around with the time you select for bedtime. Many kids have a “sleep window” where they naturally feel a little more calm and it can be difficult to get them settled if you miss that timeframe. Sometimes parents default to 8pm as a bedtime, but that could be outside your child's natural sleep window. Watch your child for natural periods of high and low energy. Spend a couple days noticing their natural rhythms and keep short notes with time, location and observed behavior. Does your kiddo fall asleep in the car or buried under heavy blankets? Do they seem to play quietly around 6:30-7 and then start to feel more active around 8 or 8:30? Often overtired kids start to get really active just around the time we are trying to get them to sleep. That can be a signal that we need to move up bedtime. Use what you learn from those observations to build a consistent routine to prepare for bed.
- Common bedtime routines may include: protein snack, bath or wipe down, lotion massage, use of bathroom, brush teeth, pajamas, 2-3 stories, prayer or meditation. Develop a schedule that works for your family. Avoid comparing what is possible for your child and family with what anyone is boasting about on social media. Some kids are easy sleepers and some struggle greatly. Remember, there is nothing more important than for kids to feel safe and adored by their adult.
- Increase physical and mental activity during the day. In order to feel tired at the end of the day, most kids need their brains and bodies to feel challenged. Progressive muscle relaxation techniques can be a really effective way to provide your child's body and brain with the input needed to settle in for a great night's sleep.
- Limit or remove screen time 2 hours before bedtime. Audio books can be a great substitute for kids who struggle to quiet their thoughts enough to relax. There are several great free online sleep meditations for kids available.
- Offer a low sugar, high protein snack about 20 minutes before bedtime. Water is a great substitute for juice/milk.
- Simplify surroundings. Remove distractions from their sleeping area. If kids are struggling to stay calm and in bed, it may help to find a place that is dark, cool and without safety hazards. Some kids might benefit from a weighted blanket, body sock, lycra snuggle sheet or a favorite comfort item to help them feel more settled.
- When tucking the child in, it can be helpful to let them know that you will check on them throughout the night. Make sure to peek in at least once before they fall asleep so that they can experience you checking on them. A fan or white noise machine can help light sleepers avoid waking at every little sound.
- For kids who struggle with separation from the parent/caregiver, try wearing a t-shirt (no buttons or embellishments that could be a choking hazard) to bed for a few consecutive nights and then let your child have the shirt in bed with them

(or use it as a pillow case) so that they can be calmed by your scent. Some families report that their kids have felt more content with a walkie talkie to communicate with the parent when needed instead of getting out of bed repeatedly. If you choose to stay with your child while they start to fall asleep, it can be helpful to wait just until they are drowsy and then give a quick goodnight and leave the room. This way the child gets the benefit of coregulation during the initial part of the bedtime routine and then gives the child the opportunity to experience falling asleep by themselves and limits the chances that they will wake up when the caregiver exits.

- Sometimes when kids share a bedroom, it may be helpful to let one fall asleep in another space and then move them into their bedroom later. Be cautious about this practice as the child may awaken disoriented in a different space than they remembered. It is usually more effective to stagger bedtimes and allow one child to fall asleep before the other comes in the room. Sometimes, a visual screen like a tent or canopy around the bed can reduce sibling distraction and give kids a sense of privacy.
- Get comfy! All routines take time to develop and won't feel "routine" until it's been practiced repeatedly. A successful routine often falls into place after a series of challenging nights where children are protesting the routine and you feel frustrated because things don't go as planned. Keep your voice low and calm. Be kind and empathetic and use as few words as possible. It will only make it more difficult for your child to rest if they think you are upset with them.
- If your child is afraid of the dark, some families have found success by hanging tiny red LED light strips in their child's room. The red light doesn't impact the child's ability to sleep but removes the fear of not being able to see what is going on in the room around them. For kids who worry about "monsters", a little spray bottle of lavender essential oil and water on the nightstand can give them a sense of safety and control over their environment.
- If your child has a history of unmet needs due to foster care, adoption, substance exposure or other issues, remember that in order to relax and rest, your child needs to experience felt safety. That means they need to understand they are safe not just be safe. Establishing felt safety can be a long process and includes continually meeting the needs they experienced as a much younger child until they FEEL safe. This can look like a 5-year-old waking every 2 hours and wanting a snack or comfort from a loving parent. We wouldn't get upset with an infant who needed that and we need to understand that if the 5-year-old didn't get that as an infant, the need is still there.
- Managing stress levels for both kids and parents sounds easier than it feels. Adding in extra connection through laughter, cuddles and enjoying shared activities before bedtime can help get you back on track. Things like listening to music, singing and dancing have the added boost of calming our brainstem when we feel stressed. A stressed, overwhelmed parent trying to help a stressed, overwhelmed child is a recipe for disaster. Don't hesitate to take a break, regroup and remember that you can try it again tomorrow.

Next Steps:

If you start to notice that your child is struggling with sleep, it may be helpful to contact their pediatrician to rule out any underlying medical issues. A local therapist or school counselor may also be a source of support.

Additional Resources:

Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child by Weissbluth

SleepFoundation.org

Sage Sleep: Rested and Connected by Rainbolt

Playful Parenting by Cohen

<http://www.childrenwithanxiety.com/how-to-teach-children-progressive-muscle-relaxation.html>