

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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Sleep for School Aged Children

REMEMBER:

- *Sleep is an essential part of a child's physical, emotional and intellectual health*
- *Parents should not negotiate with children about when they go to bed and get up*
- *Creating the right conditions for sleep can prevent many problems*
- *Dealing with children's sleep behaviour requires determination from parents*

When was the last time you had a good night's sleep? When we wake up feeling rested we feel ready to handle the challenges of the day. It is the same for our children. Sleep is a very important and often forgotten influence on their lives.

Just how much sleep do children need?

The Centre for Sleep Research at the University of Adelaide gives these guidelines for the average number of hours children need to sleep -

Newborns	~ 18 hours
Toddlers	~ 15 hours
Pre-schoolers	~ 11 to 12 hours
Primary aged	~ 10 to 11 hours
Adolescents	~ 9 hours

PROBLEMS LINKED TO POOR SLEEP

Irritability and Bad Behaviour

Poor sleep interferes with the part of the brain that controls behaviour and emotions. Children who are tired get very upset about things that would not worry them. Most children are tired and irritable at the end of the day. But children who have not slept enough can be easily annoyed at any time of the day.

Poor School Results

Lack of sleep affects children's ability to pay attention in class and to remember new information. Sleep is a time when our brains rehearse what we have learnt during the day. Not enough sleep can prevent this practice happening. Tiredness also affects children's ability to focus on what they are doing.

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This makes it difficult for them to listen in class and to complete their work.

Weight Gain and Frequent Sickness

Poor sleep reduces the hormones in the body that control appetite. They can mean that children may eat more than they need to. Lack of sleep also interferes with the body's immune system making infections and sickness more common.

Medical Help

Conditions such as sleep apnea, where children stop breathing for brief periods while they are asleep, and other conditions such as restless legs syndrome, sleep walking and night terrors can be serious problems need the attention of your doctor

But for most children who do not get enough sleep, and that is about 40% of children, there is a lot that we can do to help them.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR SLEEP

Routine

This is perhaps the most important point. A nightly ritual tells the brain that sleep is coming. Every family needs to work out their own routine, but it could be something like this – have a bath, have dinner, brush teeth, go to the toilet, have a small drink of water, read some books, a kiss goodnight, and then the light out. Try and create your own predictable and calming ritual that helps your child to slow down and prepare for sleep.

Avoid Over-Tiredness

If children are overtired they become emotional and restless and can end up fighting with you and not going to bed. Your routine should naturally end at the time of the evening when your child is tired – but not too tired.

If you stick to your routine then you should avoid this problem. Watch your child for signs they are getting tired such as yawning, rubbing their eyes or becoming irritable. These are signs that they should be in bed soon.

Avoid Excitement Before Bed

If your routine before bed allows your children to run around, wrestle with each other, or watch TV– they will become too excited and won't be able to sleep. Only allow calm activities before bed.

Limit Caffeine And Salt

Caffeinated foods such as colas and chocolate at night can stimulate children and prevent sleep. Salty foods such as pizza and potato chips can cause children to wake up during the night for a drink of water.

Not Too Hot or Too Cold

If your child's bed clothing is too hot or their bed has too many blankets – this can interfere with sleep. The ideal room temperature for sleep is around 21 degrees. Try and make sure the room is not too cool or too hot.

Darken The Room

Darkness is a signal to the brain that it is time for rest. Too much light in the room can stop this message being sent to the brain. Make the room as dark as your child can tolerate. Better to leave the door slightly open to allow light in than to have a lamp on in the room.

No Napping

Do not let your child have a nap when they get home from school. This rest will reduce their tiredness at bedtime and make it harder for them to get to sleep.

No Sleeping In

Do not allow your child to sleep in more than a half an hour past their normal wake up time on the weekends. This can interfere with their normal sleep pattern. After sleeping-in children's normal bed-time tiredness will be pushed back to a later time than normal.

Thinking about these points can help solve a lot of sleep problems. But some children will still resist sleep even if we create the right conditions.

COPING WITH SLEEP BEHAVIOUR ISSUES

We know that sleep is important to the health, happiness and the growth of our children. But sometimes children can still resist going to sleep. So how should we deal with children who refuse to go to bed, or stay in bed?

We have to remind ourselves that children do not know what is best for them. Children cannot decide when to go to sleep. It is not an issue that we should negotiate with them - they need us to take charge of this part of their lives.

Children resist getting into bed. They call out to us from bed. They get out of bed to play or to come out to us. The ideas listed below will help you deal with these problems.

Stay Calm

When we are having bedtime difficulties with children we must stay calm. If we get angry then they will get angry and upset also – which means we then have to wait for them to calm down again before they can fall asleep. Getting angry makes sleep less likely to happen.

Be Boring

If your child gets out of bed be boring and predictable. Try and react the same way each time. Don't say anything to them (or just say a few words) and send them back to bed. Many children will try and have a discussion about why they don't want to be in bed.

Remember we don't have to discuss our reasons now – if you do they will argue with you anyway. Limit the amount of talking at these times. They are happy to have a debate with you – because the longer you talk the longer they can stay up. Just ignore their talk and take them back to bed. Don't reward them with a lot of talk or another story. Be boring.

Be Consistent

If they get out of bed, call out to you, try and respond in the same, predictable way each time. Know that if you keep calm and stay boring every time they not come to you – eventually they will decide it is worth the effort and end up going to sleep.

If children call out to you, try to ignore them if we can. If you decide you must go into them try not to say too much. Watch to see if your child seems to always have a reason for staying awake. Try not to get tricked into reading another story, singing another song, or getting another drink.

Use a Chart

For some children a simple chart that is marked to show when they have gone to in bed without any problems will provide them with some extra motivation to co-operate and recognition for good behaviour.