

## Making Changes

Good sleep and good behaviour and moods go hand in hand for both parents and children. Yet sleep - much sought-after by parents and most resisted by children - is the most frequent cause of frustration for up to 25 per cent of parents of young children.

To make sleep changes you'll need:

- to stick to bedtimes and routines in the face of steadfast resistance
- have very (Did we mention **very**) large amounts of patience
- support from those around you
- someone to take turns handling the bedtime routine, if possible

### Why children try to stay up

A child may look and act exhausted but may still battle to stay awake. This is because children are fundamentally motivated to explore and ensure they miss nothing.

It's up to you to decide when your children should go to bed and at what time you expect them to settle to sleep. There's some variation in the amount of sleep each person needs, but on average, a five-year-old needs 11 hours of sleep each night.

To work out when your child should be settling to sleep take 11 hours off the time they wake each morning. For example, if your child wakes at 7am, sleep time should be 8pm.

### Routine matters

A regular bedtime routine, repeated at the same time every night, is essential for creating good sleep habits. The routine should be calm and gentle.

### A sleep routine might go something like this:

- **7:30 pm** Offer your child a warm drink and cuddle time with you or your partner, get them to brush teeth and visit the toilet, snuggle them up in bed with a favourite soft toy and read them one or two short stories - not scary ones! Tell your child it's time for sleep.
- **8:00 pm** Dim the lights and kiss your child goodnight. At this point expect them to stop playing and stay in bed. You could stay in the bedroom or leave, depending upon the habits you've already developed.

Remember, dim or no light encourages sleep, while bright lights, movement and lots of noise can indicate to your child that something interesting is going on and make them want to stay awake.

### **Bedtime mantra**

As part of your routine, it's a good idea to have a vocal cue to let your child know it's bedtime. "Time for sleep now", "Goodnight, sleep tight" or some other repetitive saying will tell your child it's time to settle to sleep. Use this mantra instead of begging or pleading with your child, as discussions can engage your child and actually decrease the chance of sleep.

### **Beds are for sleeping**

Imagine you've gone to sleep in one place then you wake up in another - this can be a frightening and disorienting experience. Yet many children fall asleep on the sofa or in front of the TV then find themselves waking later in their own bed. Instead of turning over and going back to sleep, they wake up and come to find you for reassurance, thus starting a cycle of night waking.

Put your child to sleep in the place they'll spend the night

Put your child to sleep in the place they'll spend the night. This makes a connection for your child between their bed, their bedroom and sleep that will make going to sleep there increasingly likely.

If your child doesn't currently go to sleep in their own bed, this is one area where you may need plenty of patience as they fight against the changes in routine. Stick to your new routine and you'll get results - but it may take some time to break current habits.

### **Golden Rules**

Once your child's in bed, it's crucial they stay there. Don't give them any excuses to get out of bed unnecessarily. Make sure they have water to drink, and access to the toilet if necessary.

Your child may try to get you to engage with them either by calling out to you, continually getting out of bed or deciding they're suddenly 'hungry'. Repeat your bedtime mantra, keep your response to a minimum (don't chat or cajole), put your child back to bed if necessary and then leave the room (making sure they have all they need).

### **End-of-the-day dilemmas**

Evenings can be the most exciting and chaotic time of day. Everyone is arriving home sharing stories, catching up on playtime and starting the tasks of creating meals, unpacking school bags and tuning in to the family.

If you haven't seen your children all day you may be tempted into some rough and tumble play, tickling or chasing. Try these exciting games as early as you can and finish off your play with calming activities such as jigsaws, reading stories or putting teddies and dolls to bed.

Avoid computer or video games in the evenings as these stimulate your child and make sleep more difficult.

**Daytime playtime**

**Have plenty of loving quality time with your child during waking hours.**

Many children stay awake in order to top up on playtime they feel they've missed during the day often with a car giver or parent. If your child is difficult to settle, add in one or two 20-minute playtimes during the day to make sure they've had enough time to connect with you by bedtime.

Getting the sleep everyone needs may take a week or two of effort but stick to the routine you've decided and everyone **will feel better**.

***Children need a routine in their first years***