NHS
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Humber Sensory Processing Service

Community Services for Children aged 0-18 years

Advice for bedtime and sleep

Caring, Learning & Growing Together

Bedtime and sleep can be tricky for children with sensory processing differences. If their day has been overstimulating at all they may struggle to settle and fall asleep easily or the overstimulation could be so exhausting, they fall asleep as soon as they get home, which disrupts their nights sleep. This is why it is so important for a child to have a regular calming bedtime routine.

When we sleep, we rely on our sensory modulation as well as our interoceptive sense. Without the adaptive strategies to regulate these, it can be very difficult to settle for the good nights sleep we need for healthy functioning the next day.

Some behaviours that may present when a child has difficulties with sleep are struggling to settle for a long time, requiring someone to be present in the bed or room with them while they sleep, getting up multiple times during the night or inconsistent sleep patterns.

Preparing for sleep starts early

- Encourage your child to be out in the morning sunshine and to get natural daylight, this could even be opening the curtains and windows if it is not possible to go outside.
- Increase proprioceptive and heavy work activities throughout their day (see proprioception resource).
- Utilise night-time mode on electronics throughout the day where possible. Limiting screen time in the 1-2 hours before bedtime. Blue light is alerting and can have a negative impact on melatonin production.

"I used to find it very difficult to wake up in the mornings, often sleeping in and struggling to get up once my alarm went off. I started placing my alarm away from my bed and near my window so when it went off in the morning, I would have to get out of bed and would open my curtains to let in some sunlight. Because of this, I was now awake and moving, allowing me to have a good start to my morning routine."

Create a bedtime routine

Creating a good sleep routine makes the task of going to bed predictable and reassuring. More information about this can be found on our resource "Routine and Predictability". When developing a bedtime routine, make sure it is manageable and easy for you to maintain.

- Relax in a quiet space before heading to bed with dim lighting and decreased sensory input e.g., visual, and auditory stimulation.
- Create a routine which includes proprioceptive activities a maximum of 40 minutes before bedtime e.g., relaxing yoga could regulate other senses before bedtime.
- Relaxing using a rhythmic motion such as gently rocking in a rocking chair can be very calming.

- Choose a relaxing activity like reading, drawing, jigsaw puzzles, cards or knitting to wind down.
- Allow your child to wear pyjamas which they find comfortable, allow them to shop for pyjamas with you (where possible) to select fabrics and designs they prefer – removing tags and labels can also make nightwear more comfortable. A large shirt or nightie may be preferable if your child is tactile sensitive.
- Offer heavy body pillows, duvets, or weighted soft toys. Ensure your child can get out if they need to and always follow manufacturers guidelines.
- Deep breathing or sucking may help the body feel more calm and ready for sleep; for example, blow up a balloon several times, drink room temperature water through a straw, or suck on a sugarless mint.
- Have a tight hug or play the ‘steam roller’ game (roll an exercise ball firmly over your child’s back while they lie on the carpeted floor or mat).
- Dim the lights and close the curtains prior to your child entering the room.
- Avoid showering before bed, as this can be alerting, where possible opt for a warm bath.
- If your child is afraid of heights, try putting a mattress on the floor, or using a bed rail, to help them feel secure.
- Trial using a weighted blanket or wrapping your child up tightly in a blanket prior to bedtime and ensure they are supervised. Following all up to date guidance for weighted products and manufacturer’s guidance.

Sleep associations

Sleep associations are the conditions a child learns they need to be able to fall asleep. If your child falls asleep with a night light on, or the door open, their brain will expect this to be the same if they wake up in the night. If the conditions have changed, for example, the door is now closed, it can be very alerting and make it tricky to relax and return to sleeping. If possible, try to keep the environment your child falls asleep in, the same throughout the night.

- Try using a sleep mask or black out curtains if your child is visually sensitive.
- Use a wheat bag or hot water bottle to provide comfort. A teddy or pillow with your perfume/cologne on to help with separation.
- A bed tent may help block out visual distractions if your child is visually sensitive.
- Try playing soft rhythmical sounds. It is common to use white noise as a sleeping aid however, pink noise, such as wind and rain sounds is considered more relaxing for our brain. It may decrease the time it takes to fall asleep as well as improve sleep quality. You can search ‘pink noise’ on YouTube or Spotify.
- Try Lycra compression sheets, which provide calming deep pressure, ensure your child can get out if they need to.
- Try using a night light which is red in colour. Our brain recognises red light in a similar way to the sun setting, and unlike blue light, red light does not interfere with melatonin production.