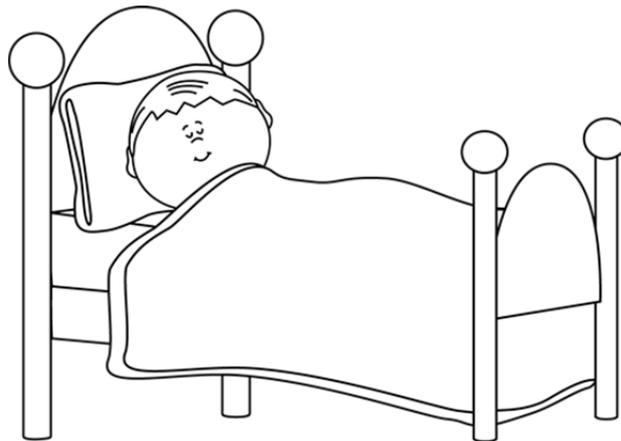


# Sleep and Anxiety

## Feeling Safe and Secure at Bedtime

A guide for parents and carers



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## About This Booklet

- This booklet is aimed at parents and carers of children who have difficulties getting to sleep or staying asleep due to anxiety.
- All the advice and information in this booklet is based on scientific evidence<sup>1</sup>
- It's important to remember that many factors affect children's sleep and there is no 'one size fits all' approach to tackling sleep problems
- We aim to help you use your relationship with your child to help them (and you!) get a better night's sleep.



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<sup>1</sup> This includes biology, neuroscience, attachment theory and behaviourism

## Why is Sleep Important?

- If you have children then you will probably know how it feels when you haven't had enough sleep!
- Sleep is **essential** in keeping us healthy; lack of sleep can negatively affect both our physical and mental health<sup>2</sup>

## How Much Sleep Does My Child Need?

The chart below is an approximate guide to how much sleep is needed at different ages<sup>3</sup>

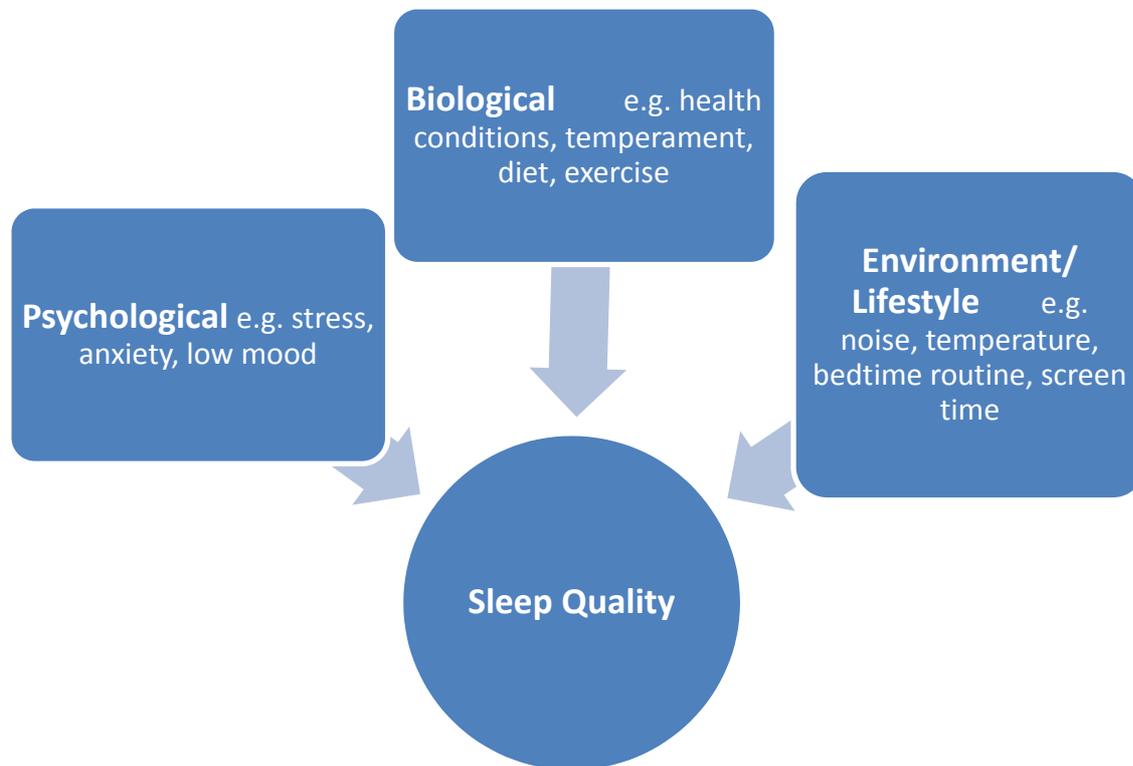
<b>1 week</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 8 hrs</li><li>• Night - 8 hrs 30 mins</li></ul>	<b>4 weeks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 6-7 hrs</li><li>• Night - 8-9hrs</li></ul>	<b>3 months</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 4-5 hrs</li><li>• Night - 10-11 hrs</li></ul>	<b>6 months</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 3hrs</li><li>• Night - 11hrs</li></ul>	<b>9 months</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 2hrs 30mins</li><li>• Night - 11hrs</li></ul>	<b>1 year</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day 2hrs 30 mins</li><li>• Night - 11hrs</li></ul>
<b>2 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 1hr 30 mins</li><li>• Night - 11hrs 30 mins</li></ul>	<b>3 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day - 0-45 mins</li><li>• Night - 11hrs 30 mins - 12hrs</li></ul>	<b>4 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Night - 11hrs 30 mins</li></ul>	<b>5 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Night - 11hrs</li></ul>	<b>6 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10hrs 45 mins</li></ul>	<b>7 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10hrs 30 mins</li></ul>
<b>8 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10hrs 15 mins</li></ul>	<b>9 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10hrs</li></ul>	<b>10 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9hrs 45mins</li></ul>	<b>11 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9hrs 30mins</li></ul>	<b>12 -13 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9hrs 15 mins</li></ul>	<b>14-16 years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9hrs</li></ul>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/> for more information

<sup>3</sup> Taken from <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-much-sleep-do-kids-need/>

## What Affects Sleep?

Lots of different things can affect our sleep. These can be psychological, biological or related to environment and lifestyle<sup>4</sup>. Some examples are given below



All of the above applies equally to children and adults, though the difference is that children need their parents or carers to take charge in making adaptations.

Parents are also in charge of helping children feel safe and secure at bedtime.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness> for further information

## Sleep ‘Hygiene’

- Sleep hygiene refers to different practices and habits that help people of all ages to get a good night’s sleep.
- Some key principles of sleep hygiene are outlined below<sup>5</sup>:

Do	Don’t
<p>Have a relaxing bedtime routine (screen free) that takes around one hour. This could include having a bath, reading, a relaxation exercise and telling calming and reassuring stories</p> <p>Try to go to bed and wake up at a regular time every day</p> <p>Ensure your bedroom is cool, dark and as quiet as possible (e.g. using black-out blinds or thick curtains, earplugs and a fan)</p> <p>Exercise regularly, but not close to bedtime</p> <p>Try using a diary or journal to get ‘buzzing’ thoughts out of your head</p> <p>Invest in a good quality mattress that you have tried and tested if possible</p> <p>Consider putting your phone away and turning it off overnight</p>	<p>Try to do work in bed, this may lead you to associate your bed with being mentally stimulated and make it harder to sleep</p> <p>Use screens (e.g. phones, tablets, laptops, television) within one hour of bedtime, these can prevent the natural release of melatonin which is triggered by darkness and helps you to sleep</p> <p>Consume caffeine within a few hours of bedtime</p> <p>Lie awake in bed for hours! If you find yourself unable to sleep for more than 20 mins, get out of bed and do something calming (e.g. reading). Return to bed when tired.</p> <p>Try and ‘will yourself’ to sleep, this will increase your stress levels and make getting to sleep even less likely</p>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/> for further information

## Feeling Safe & Secure

- From an evolutionary perspective, we are most vulnerable when we are asleep, alone and in the dark. Think about how we have evolved from sleeping in caves in the stone ages. Even though we don't need to worry about dangers like sabre-toothed tiger attacks anymore, our brains are hard-wired to keep us safe from potential threats.
- If we feel unsafe then it is very difficult to sleep. You'll know this if you've ever heard 'bumps' in the night or if you've been kept awake worrying about a stressful situation or upcoming event. This is why feeling safe at bedtime is the first step to learning to fall asleep alone.
- Children, and especially young children, look to their parents or carers to make them feel safe. It is normal for young children to fear being separated from you as you are their 'protector'<sup>6</sup>.
- Bedtime can be especially scary for young children; they are usually separated from you, alone in their own room and in the darkness. It is very common for children to be fearful of the dark and going to sleep.
- They may not always be able to tell you their fears<sup>7</sup> in the same way as an adult, however they may say that they are scared of 'monsters' or 'baddies'. It is important to be sensitive to your child's fears and take them seriously. It will not work to tell your child that their worries and fears are silly. Instead show them that you understand why they may feel worried. Show them that you're not worried; try to **model being calm**. Help them to think differently about their worry and move on to something positive and playful.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on managing childhood anxiety generally see 'The Opposite of Worry' by L.J. Cohen

<sup>7</sup> Common childhood fears include school transition, changes in the family, separation from you, death, illness, bullying and loneliness

## Helping your Child Learn to Fall Asleep Alone

Helping your child learn to fall asleep alone is a learning process which can often take a few months. It is therefore important that you feel ready to commit to this process in order for it to work best.

1. To begin this process, your child must first feel secure at bedtime. In order to create this security, begin by talking to your child about what you are doing. You are helping them learn to fall asleep on their own. It is important to emphasise that until your child is ready, you will not leave them alone in the dark.
2. Take your child shopping and let them choose a cuddly toy that they can take to bed with them at night and who will keep them safe. This cuddly toy will eventually take the position of you at bedtime. Choose a book that you can read to your child before going to sleep.
3. Create an evening routine. This may for example involve eating dinner, having a bath and then getting into pyjamas. The last 30 minutes of this routine should be spent tucking your child into bed with their cuddly toy and reading a book together.
4. Begin this reading routine by sitting beside your child's bed, keeping close to your child's body. After reading, turn out the lights but make sure your child has control over a light that is close by their bed. Reassure your child that you will stay with them until they fall asleep. Emphasise that if your child feels scared in the night, they can turn on their light and call for you and you will come whenever they need you.

5. When your child begins to fall asleep relatively quickly using this routine, you can begin to sit beside the bed without touching your child. Reassure your child that you will be with them until they fall asleep but won't touch them as they need to learn to fall asleep alone.  
At this point your child may every so often reach out to touch you. This is OK. They are just checking you are there, where you said you would be.
6. Once this becomes easier, you can move yourself away from the bed at night time. Sit in a chair slightly away from the bed, and move this further and further away as your child becomes more confident.
7. At each stage, praise your child and reassure them that they can do this. They are starting to fall asleep alone and this is OK.
8. Eventually, move your chair to the doorway, and then just outside the open doorway.
9. Begin to tell your child that you need to go and check the laundry, or put the kettle on and reassure them that you will be back in 5 minutes. Encourage your child that their cuddly toy will keep them safe whilst you are gone.
10. When you come back after 5 minutes, sit for 5 minutes and ask your child how they are doing. You can then go away for another 5 minutes, maybe to make an urgent phone call, and then come back again<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>For further information about teaching your child to sleep alone visit <https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/7-year-old-with-nighttime-anxiety-is-afraid-of-the-dark-and-going-to-sleep-at-bedtime?A=SearchResult&SearchID=11179056&ObjectID=973991&ObjectType=35>

This learning process will be different for each child. Some may learn quickly, others slowly. It is important to find the right balance of moving the process forward, but not moving too quickly and worrying the child which may result in starting the process over again.

Once your child feels safe and confident at bedtime, you will be able to tuck them into bed and leave them alone as they will have learnt how to put themselves to sleep! You can enjoy a quiet, peaceful evening!

## **Easier Said Than Done!**

- As a parent or carer plenty of things can get in the way of being patient, empathic and calm! Achieving this 100% of the time is unrealistic; what is important is that we aim for this goal, learn from our mistakes and don't beat ourselves up for not being 'perfect'.
- It can be tempting to compare ourselves to other parents who seem to not have any difficulties with getting their children off to sleep (social media can make unhelpful comparisons all too easy!).
- Children are often more aware of changes in their parents or carers than we like to think. If there is a lot of change or stress for you then it is likely that your child will notice and they may respond with anxiety. If you think this is the case then listening and being open and empathic is the best approach. From their perspective, people acting differently but not knowing why can be very unsettling.
- It takes time and consistency to achieve change. It is important that all main caregivers use the same approach so that your child knows what to expect.
- If you feel that you are struggling with stress or mental health difficulties it is important that you seek support<sup>9</sup>. Contact your GP and use your existing support networks.

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/> for a list of mental health helplines.

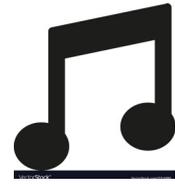
# Tips to Bridge the Night-time Distance with Children



Give your child an item of your clothing e.g. a shirt to go to sleep with



Spray some of your perfume in your child's bedroom to remind them of you



Tape record a parent singing a lullaby to the child



Give them your pillow to sleep with to be close to you



Fill your child's pillow with kisses and hugs



Give your child a paper heart before they go to sleep. When they're asleep, put a stack of hearts beside their bed so when they believe that you checked on them throughout the night



Leave a book under your child's pillow and tell them you will read it together in the morning



Get a special container and have your child put in all of their wishes for the next day

## **Summary**

There are lots of reasons why children struggle to sleep well. As parents and carers it is our responsibility to try to understand why and make the right changes. Young children feel safe when they know that you are there to protect them. It is your relationship with them that gives your child a feeling of safety and security.

All children are different and just because your child has sleeping difficulties that doesn't mean you have 'failed'! Remember that it is normal for children to struggle with sleep and addressing this is a case of trial and error.

## **Other Helpful Resources**

### **Books:**

Cohen, L.J. (2013) *The Opposite of Worry*. Ballantine: New York

Hoffman, K., Cooper, G. & Powell, B. (2017) *Raising A Secure Child*. Guilford: London

Silver, M. (2013) *Attachment in Common Sense and Doodles: A Practical Guide*. JKP: London

### **Websites/Internet Resources:**

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness)

[www.ahaparenting.com](http://www.ahaparenting.com)

[www.theedenacademy.co.uk/assets/uploads/Sleep\\_training\\_techniques\\_Bartshealth.pdf](http://www.theedenacademy.co.uk/assets/uploads/Sleep_training_techniques_Bartshealth.pdf)

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