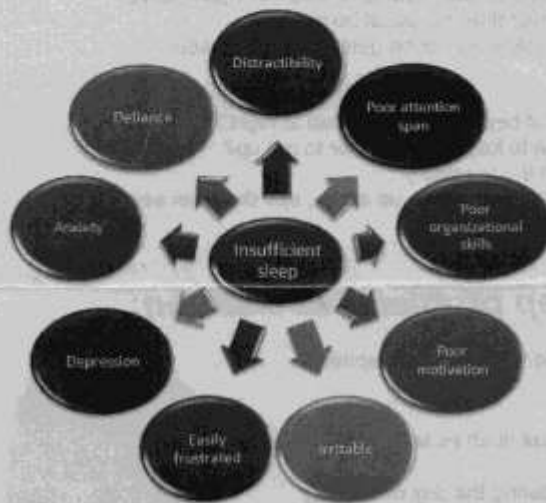


# Solving Children's Sleep Problems & Developing Good Sleep Habits

**Note:** The following recommendations contained in this document are intended for use with children who are older than 18 months of age who are presenting with significant sleep difficulties. They are not intended to be used for children under 18 months of age.

## Why all the fuss about children & sleep?



We live in a sleep deprived society. On average, school aged children are getting about one hour less sleep per night than school children 30 years ago. Kindergartners are getting half an hour less.

For today's children, overscheduling of activities, lax bedtimes, and electronics in the bedroom are some of the culprits. Many parents simply are not aware of how much sleep their children need in order to function normally and to remain happy and healthy.

Unfortunately, insufficient sleep or poor quality sleep can lead to a multitude of problems for children, such as bad behavior, attention problems, and poor academic performance. Studies are even beginning to link insufficient sleep with ADHD and childhood obesity.

The effect of insufficient sleep on school children is worrisome. Without enough sleep, children cannot adequately pay attention during class or remember

what they have learned. In one study, reducing young school aged children's sleep by one hour per night was shown to reduce their academic functioning by the equivalent of two grade levels after only three nights.

We know that people who are sleep deprived have more difficulty controlling their emotions. The part of the brain that helps us to control our actions and responses to feelings is greatly affected by lack of sleep. In social situations, an overtired child may have more conflicts with others, or be bossy, demanding, and resistant to guidance. Sleep deprived children can be difficult to parent.

While sleep problems usually decline as children get older, their early sleep patterns tend to be the best indicator of future sleep troubles. Poor sleep habits as a child can lead to lifelong sleep issues.

## How much sleep is enough sleep for children?

Different people need different amounts of sleep. The chart below lists the recommended average amount of sleep for each age group.

Child's Age	Sleep Requirement	Child's Age	Sleep Requirement	Child's Age	Sleep Requirement
12 months	13.5 hours	5 years	11 hours	10 years	10 hours
18 months	13.5 hours	6 years	11 hours	11 years	10 hours
2 years	13 hours	7 years	11 hours	12-13 years	9.5-10 hours
3 years	12 hours	8 years	10-11 hours	14 years	9.5-10 hours
4 years	11.5 hours	9 years	10-11 hours	15 years	9.5 hours

Sometimes, children appear to be receiving a *sufficient amount of sleep*, however they are having a *poor quality sleep* due to medical or other causes. The best way to tell if your children are getting enough sleep is to notice how they act while they are awake. If you suspect your child may not be receiving enough sleep or good quality sleep, look for signs such as these:

For preschoolers:

- Does my child fall asleep in the car almost every time I drive somewhere with him?
- Do I have to wake my child almost every morning?
- Does my child seem overtired, cranky, irritable, aggressive, over-emotional, or hyperactive?
- On some nights, does my child "crash" much earlier than his usual bedtime?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, your child may not be getting enough sleep.

For school-aged children:

- Can my child fall asleep within 15 to 30 minutes of being tucked into bed at night?
- Can my child wake up easily, without needing me to keep bugging her to get up?
- Is my child awake and alert all day? (Check with the teacher!)

In other words, if your child can go to bed, fall asleep easily, wake up easily, and does not seem tired during the day, then she is likely getting enough sleep.

**Some common causes of sleep problems in children:**

- Medical problems such as enlarged tonsils or adenoids, or sleep apnea (sometimes indicated by loud snoring)
- Certain medications
- Disruptive sleep-related problems, including issues such as teeth grinding, sleep-walking, nightmares or night terrors
- Consuming caffeine (e.g. in carbonated drinks) during the day or evening
- Screen time (e.g. T.V., computer, Nintendo) or other electronics (iPod, music) too close to bedtime
- Physical activity too close to bedtime (i.e. soccer, trampoline, tickling/wrestling)
- Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep due to stress, anxiety, or being unable to stop thinking about worries, concerns, or things that have happened during the day
- Lack of a quiet bedtime routine that is sufficient to relax the child's body and mind, and prepare him for a sleep state
- A sleep environment that is too bright (e.g. night light or lamp left on in the bedroom) and/or too noisy
- Resistance to settling down to sleep (e.g. when your child does not want to go to bed at night, she may throw a tantrum, stall, continue to come out of her room when she is supposed to be in bed, or just refuse to go to sleep)
- Too many activities/toys to play with in bed (e.g. stuffed toys, games, books, etc.)
- Waking during the night (e.g., bathroom, snack, wandering the house, going to parent's room)
- Difficulty soothing herself and settling back to sleep on her own because she has been used to parent's laying with her at bedtime, or has being rocked to sleep, or has used a pacifier. The child feels that she needs these things to fall asleep and, without them, she feels the need to stay awake.
- Children who have not learned to soothe themselves and go to sleep on their own frequently have separation anxiety problems. Such children may feel anxious if the parent is not present in the



bedroom at bedtime and/or throughout the night. They may be unable or unwilling to relax and sleep or, likewise, the parent(s) may feel anxious about separating from the child.

## **Teaching your child good sleep habits:**

Do...keep to a regular daily routine. Having the same waking time, meal times, nap time and play times each day will help your children feel secure and comfortable, and can help with a smooth bedtime. Children need predictability in their routine and they like to know what to expect.

Do...make sure your children have varied activities during the day, including lots of physical activity and some fresh air.

Do...make bedtime a special time. It should be a time for you to interact with your children in a way that is secure and loving, yet firm. At bedtime, spend some special time with your children. Use a simple, regular bedtime routine. At the end of the routine, the lights are switched off and it is time for your children to fall asleep on their own. Try to make sure the sleep routine you use can be implemented anywhere, so your children learn that they can fall asleep on their own at bedtime wherever they are.



Do...use "white noise" at a very low volume if your child is soothed by it. White noise can come from a fan or humidifier, a portable white noise machine, or soft, relaxing music (with no words!). White noise can also help to block out other sounds or noises.

Do...use light switches to your advantage. Start preparing your child for a sleep state approximately 90 minutes before you want him to be "out cold" by keeping as many household lights as possible off or at least dim during this time. Darkness (and light) help to signal the brain into the sleep-wake cycle. In the morning, get your child into the bright light.

Don't...fill up the bed with toys. Keep it a place to sleep, rather than a place to play. One or two transitional objects (e.g. favorite doll, blanket, mommy's sweater, or special book) are okay and can even help with separation issues, but too many toys in bed can be distracting and may keep children from falling asleep.

Don't...use sending your child to bed as a punishment or a threat. Bedtime needs to be a positive, secure, loving time, not a punishment. Teach your children that bedtime is enjoyable. If the feeling around bedtime is a good feeling, your child will fall asleep more easily.

Don't...give children drinks and foods with caffeine in them, like hot chocolate, tea, cola, iced cappuccinos, chocolate, etc. Even caffeine earlier in the day can disrupt the sleep cycle for some people.

Don't...let children watch too much TV during the day, and avoid giving them screen time and TV for 90 minutes before you want them to be "out cold". That time needs to be "quiet time" in order to prepare them for a sleep state. Research shows that watching TV is linked to poor sleep, especially if the TV set is located in the child's bedroom. The presence of other media (e.g. computer, video games) in children's bedrooms is also associated with sleep problems.

## **Bedtime Training for Children:**

This series of recommendations is designed to help you teach your children to fall asleep by themselves and stay asleep at night, to ensure they are able to receive an optimal amount of good quality sleep.

1. If your child has difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep at night, or is showing any signs indicating that perhaps she is not getting enough sleep, it is suggested that you schedule an

appointment with her pediatrician or physician so that all possible medical causes for the sleep difficulties can be ruled out.

2. It may help to set up the child's sleep environment by doing the following:

- If it is still bright outside as bedtime approaches, darken the bedroom *completely* by cutting a piece of cardboard to fit tightly inside the window frame. Pop the cardboard out in the mornings and slide it back in again in the evenings.
- Put a sippy cup, apple & potty in the bedroom at bedtime, if your child tends to use thirst or hunger or potty as excuses to get your attention, leave the bedroom, or stay awake past bedtime.
- Switch off all bedroom and hallway lights. If the child is used to having a night light on at bedtime, ensure it has a very dark colored bulb and color the outside of the night light cover with black Sharpie felt marker. The goal here is to have the bedroom as dark as possible. If your child has a history of switching on the overhead light or bed side lamp when you leave the room at bedtime, remove the lamp from the bedroom and/or remove the bulb from the overhead light. Human beings are not nocturnal animals. We are made to sleep at night and stay awake during the day. Too much light in the environment at bedtime will trigger a child's natural instinct to stay awake.
- Use "white noise" at low volume at bedtime, e.g. humidifier, fan, soft music (no words, no classical music), or nature sounds if your child has difficulty relaxing or calming down at bedtime, or seems unable to stop thinking about worries, concerns or things that have happened during his day. Caution: white noise will cause some children to have difficulty falling asleep.
- Make sure your child's bed is comfortable. One strategy that has helped some children is to place a soft foam topper on the mattress. Some children are also able to relax more easily with a lighter blanket or a heavy blanket or soft flannel sheets instead of stiffer cotton sheets. Some parents have found that warming the bed with an electric blanket just prior to bedtime will help their child relax and feel more comfortable. However, leaving the electric blanket turned on all night is not recommended.



3. Calculate your child's "Sleep Goal" (the time by which he needs to be "out cold" at night). Based on the chart on Page 1, plus your knowledge of what time your child needs to wake in the morning, do the math to determine what time she needs to be asleep by, in order to receive sufficient sleep. This is your child's Sleep Goal.
4. Go spa(!) for 90 minutes prior to your child's Sleep Goal. Spa Time will be the first phase of your bedtime routine. Spa Time refers to creating an environment in your home that is peaceful, quiet (i.e. no TV, computer, video games, music, active play/wrestling/tickling), and dimly lit. Try to quiet down the whole house. You need to help your child relax his body and brain so that he will be capable of entering a sleep state at bedtime. It is highly recommended that other family members who wish to listen to music or watch television during the Spa Time (i.e. Dad watching the game) do so with the use of headphones, so that the house is quiet and your child is better able to relax and calm down before bed.
5. Bedtime will be the second phase of your routine. Put your child into bed 45 minutes prior to her Sleep Goal so that you can complete the bedtime activities (i.e. stories, massage, prayers, and/or parent-child talks) approximately 30 minutes before her Sleep Goal.
6. If you read to your child in his bedroom at bedtime, it is suggested that you switch off all the bedroom lights and use only a dim book light (just enough to light up the page, not the room). Sit in a chair while your child is lying in bed (avoid lying beside him), talk softly as you read the story, and choose

relaxing storybooks to read (i.e. children's bedtime stories or children's mediation stories, written by authors such as Maureen Garth). The goal of story time at bedtime is to help your child relax, teach him to fall asleep and soothe himself, and avoid stimulating his brain with exciting stories. Exciting stories can be read during the day.

7. If you choose to give your child a quiet massage at bedtime, it is suggested you do so with the bedroom lights switched off, while keeping all noise and talking to a minimum and speaking in a monotone manner (as in a "spa" environment).
8. Lights Out will be the third phase of the bedtime routine. This refers to the point where you leave the room and let her fall asleep on her own. Lights Out should occur 30 minutes prior to your child's Sleep Goal.
9. If you expect that your child will come out of the bedroom, put up a baby gate or insert a plywood "gate" (at eye level) in the bedroom doorway, so she can see out but not get out of the bedroom. Tell her, "It's time for you to sleep now," and leave the area. Perhaps go to your own bedroom so your child does not think she is missing out on anything. At this point, she will have had one hour of "quiet time" in a dimly lit home and she will have been in her warm bed for 15 minutes in the dark with minimal noise, all excellent preparation for entering a sleep state on her own.

Note: The baby gate/plywood insert is a temporary measure, only to be used until such time as the child learns to fall asleep on her own, understands that bedtime actually does mean bedtime, and is no longer waking up in the middle of the night to go sleep with Mommy and Daddy. Typically, such progress is achieved within 2-3 weeks of implementing a consistent, calm bedtime routine.

10. If your young child cries after being put to bed and the baby gate goes up, every 15 minutes calmly let him know from a distance, "Mommy(Daddy) is here. Go to sleep now." Avoid engaging in a discussion or negotiation with your child at bedtime. He has everything he needs to fall asleep on his own and he will learn to do so once he realizes bedtime actually does mean bedtime.
11. In order to track your child's progress and determine if the new sleep routine is effectively addressing his sleep issues, it is suggested you start a Sleep Log and use it for a couple of weeks. Use the Sleep Log to track the following:
  - (1) how long it takes for your child to fall asleep after Lights Out;
  - (2) how long your child cries each night before he falls asleep (if he typically cries when put to bed);
  - (3) the number of wakings during the night (and how long it takes him to fall back to sleep).
 The Sleep Log will help you to see that you are making progress. It can also serve as valuable information for any health professional, if you need to consult with a professional regarding your child's sleep issues.

### Sample Bedtime Routine:

This is a sample routine for a six-year-old child, who needs to wake at 7:00 a.m. to get ready for school.

Time	Phase	Appropriate Activities/Actions
6:30	Phase I: Spa Time	Begin dimming lights and quieting the house. Child can play calm games/activities, have a warm bath, brush teeth.
7:15	Phase II: Bedtime	Put child into bed and begin bedtime stories, massage, bedtime prayers and/or quiet conversation.
7:30	Phase III: Lights Out	Switch off all lights in bedroom, start white noise, put up baby gate (if needed), and leave child alone in bedroom.
8:00	Sleep Goal	Child should be asleep by this time.

## **Recommended Children's Bedtime Stories**

**Starbright--Meditations for Children:** "Starbright" is a collection of the stories Garth created as her child grew older. These innovative meditations are simple visualizations parents and teachers can read to their children to help them sleep, develop concentration, awaken creativity, and learn to quiet themselves.

**Moonbeam: A Book of Meditations for Children:** In "Moonbeam," Garth invites her readers to accompany her on journeys into an imaginative world of animals, people and places. She shows parents how to use these imaginings with their children, helping them deal with their anxieties, develop their concentration and enhance their creativity.

**Earthlight:** "Earthlight" completes a series of Maureen's meditation books for children and joins its predecessors in bring wonder and adventure into their lives through the use of visualization. These meditations help children sleep more peacefully, to learn to still themselves, to be freed of their worries, and to develop their ability to concentrate. "Earthlight" is also an ideal resource for those who wish to nurture the innate creativity within each child.

**Sunshine: More Meditations for Children:** Maureen Garth's third collection of meditations to read aloud to help children sleep, gain self-confidence, concentrate, and develop creativity.

**Inner Garden: Meditations for Life from 9 to 90:** From the author of *Starbright* and *Moonbeam*--guided meditations to help adults and children find their spiritual depths and discover serenity and creativity in our stressful world.

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**To discuss your child's sleep issues in more depth, or obtain additional sleep recommendations...**

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September 2013