



A close-up photograph of a baby lying in a hospital bed. The baby has light skin and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera. A nasal cannula is taped to the baby's nose. The baby is wearing a green and white striped hospital gown. A hand is visible at the bottom right, gently holding the baby's arm. The background is a soft-focus hospital room.

Supporting your child with sleep

A guide by Emma Johnston
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Why does sleep matter?

When we sleep, our bodies and minds are being restored and replenished. Children who sleep well tend to have improved attention, memory, behaviour, learning capacity, and physical health.

Sleep difficulties are very common, affecting around 40% of adults and 50% of children. This rises to around 80% for children with additional needs. You are not alone, and things can improve!

Common sleep problems

Families often report some of the following:

- No bedtime routine, or one that isn't working
- Child doesn't seem tired at bedtime
- Anxiety, in the child or the adults around them
- Sensory needs affecting ability to settle
- Environmental factors (light, noise, temperature)
- Hunger or thirst at bedtime

Why can't my child sleep?

Sleep difficulties rarely have just one cause. It helps to think about the full picture. Here are some areas to consider:

Diet

Avoid sugary food or drinks close to bedtime. Instead, try slow-release energy snacks such as dairy products, bananas, nuts and seeds, cherries, oats, or a malted drink.

If your child follows a restricted diet, it is worth checking their iron levels, low iron can cause overtiredness that paradoxically makes it harder to fall asleep.

Communication

Does your child understand the concept of day and night, bedtime routines, and what is being asked of them? Tools such as visual timetables and social stories can help children understand and feel more prepared for sleep.

Activity and Light

Physical activity during the day and exposure to natural light in the morning both help to regulate your child's body clock and build their 'sleep drive'.



Screens and Winding Down

Aim for at least one hour free from screens (TV, tablets, phones) before bed. Screens can suppress melatonin, the hormone that helps us fall asleep, and can leave the brain in a hyper-aroused state even when a child looks calm.

Rather than abruptly switching off, try sitting alongside your child and gently drawing them into a quieter activity. Avoid linking 'screen off' directly to 'bedtime', which can create a negative association.

Sensory Processing

Some children are hypersensitive (sounds, lights, and sensations feel too intense) or hyposensitive (they crave more sensation to feel regulated). Both can make settling to sleep very difficult.

Things that may help:

- Sensory wind-down activities before bed
- Deep pressure, gentle massage, or firm hugs
- White noise in the bedroom (helpful for some children)
- Check for overpowering smells, such as cooking

Sleep Associations

What does your child rely on to fall asleep? (For example: a parent staying in the room, a dummy, a drink of milk, the TV on, a nightlight.) Consider whether current associations are helpful or whether they might need to be adjusted over time.

A Few Other Things to Consider

Rhythmic Movement

Does your child rock or bang their head to fall asleep? This is one way some children self-soothe into sleep. It may seem like it goes on all night, but it typically happens at natural waking points between sleep cycles (see below).

Night-time Wetting (Enuresis)

Using a waterproof mattress protector and having spare bedding ready to hand can make night-time changes much quicker and easier for everyone.

Daytime Naps

From around age 4, most children no longer need daytime naps. Keeping them awake during the day helps to build their sleep drive. If needed, use gentle activity, music, or brief screen time to help them stay awake.

Tip: If you are unsure what is going on, try keeping a sleep diary for two weeks. It can reveal patterns that are hard to see day-to-day.

The science behind sleep

The Sleep Cycle

All humans move through several stages of sleep throughout the night, cycling through them four to six times. We may briefly wake between cycles, this is completely normal.

Stage	What is happening?
1	Light sleep - easy to wake. You may notice twitching or small jerks.
2	Slightly deeper sleep, the body is preparing for deep sleep. Heart rate slows.
3	Deep (slow wave) sleep, harder to rouse. This is the most restorative stage.
4	REM (Rapid Eye Movement) - dream sleep. Vital for mental and emotional development.

Important: If your child wakes between cycles and finds themselves in a different environment from where they fell asleep (for example, a parent has left the room), they may fully wake rather than drift back off. This is why settling your child in the same place they will sleep all night is so important.

Sleep Drive and Melatonin

Our circadian rhythm (body clock) gradually builds a 'sleep drive' during the day. As energy depletes, the urge to sleep increases. If your child does not seem tired at bedtime, consider whether they have been active enough during the day, or whether screens close to bedtime may be suppressing their melatonin.

Some children with additional learning needs (ALN) may not naturally produce enough melatonin. If you are concerned, speak to your GP or paediatrician.

Creating a plan

If you feel the time is right to make changes, here are some principles to guide you:

- Choose the right moment - school holidays can be a good time, when there is more flexibility and adult capacity.
- Change one thing at a time - small, consistent steps work better than overhauling everything at once.
- Keep the bedtime routine short and sustainable.
- Address unhelpful sleep associations gradually.
- Consistency is key - try to stick to the routine every night.
- Things may get harder before they get easier - this is normal and does not mean the plan is failing.
- Keep a record of changes - progress can be hard to notice without notes to look back on.
- Reassess, adjust, and try again - every child is different.

Top tips

Bedroom - Keep it simple and calm - avoid stimulating toys or decorations in the sleep space if possible.

Lighting - Use warm, yellow-toned lighting in the evening. Avoid bright white lights. Note that complete darkness can feel disorientating for some children - a dim nightlight may help.

Bath / Shower - A warm bath or shower before bed causes a natural drop in body temperature afterwards, which helps the body feel ready for sleep.

Rewards - Build rewards into the bedtime routine (e.g. for getting into pyjamas or brushing teeth). Do not use rewards for falling asleep itself, children cannot control this.

The Sleep Charity

Free telephone advice for parents, carers, and professionals.

Phone: 03303 530 541

Hours: Mon & Wed, 9–11am | Mon, Tues, Thurs, 7–9pm

www.thesleepcharity.org.uk

ERIC - Children's Bowel and Bladder Charity

Support and advice for families dealing with bedwetting and night-time toileting.

Phone: 0808 801 0343 (free to call)

Hours: Mon – Thur, 10am – 2pm

eric.org.uk



