Norfolk and Suffolk NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Sleep: Children and Young People

Please listen to the Psychology in Schools Podcast on this topic: https://youtu.be/U4pthSEi8dk

Sleep - it's an essential part of our lives, but it's also a great source of frustration and stress for many young people, parents and carers. If you are finding it hard to get enough sleep, perhaps due to understandable worries at the moment, a lack of sleep can cause more anxiety and a pressure to sleep better the next night, especially when we think about what we need to do the next day. This can then make us more anxious about sleeping and disrupt our sleep even more. This can be particularly difficult if our children are not sleeping well, but hold on, do not despair. There is plenty of good advice to get your child's sleep back on the right track and to help you to get the sleep you need.

Dr Dimitri Gavriloff, a Clinical Psychologist specialising in sleep, highlights how important it is to get into a routine with sleep and how these usual routines may have been disrupted during lockdown. Many of us have been spending more time at home and we may have changed many of our usual activities. As Dr Gavriloff points out, "the main signal keeping our internal clock or 'circadian rhythm' in time is light". This is why things like screen time, getting natural light each day and using black out blinds are often talked about when sleep problems crop up (*more about these later...*).

Q. But what is a circadian rhythm and why is it important?

Well, it can be helpful to think about how as individuals we tend to get sleepy or drowsy around the same times each day and we can feel more alert at other times and this is known as our 'circadian rhythm'. It is our 24-hour internal clock running in the background of our brains and it cycles between sleepiness and alertness and it works best when we have regular sleep habits. A regular sleep habit involves waking around the same time each day and going to bed around the same time and avoiding daytime naps. If you have a nap during the afternoon, you may find it harder to sleep at night as you will feel less 'sleep pressure' (the drive that makes you want to go to sleep).

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Q. Why won't my children go to sleep? How much is too much sleep? When should my children be going to bed?

If you have ever asked these questions or experienced difficulties with your child's sleep, you won't be alone. Getting a good night's sleep is a challenge that young people and parents face daily. There are many factors which can impact on a young person's sleep; mood, worry, technology, diet, exercise, light levels, noise, and temperature are just some of the common factors.

With the current COVID-19 pandemic, and the change in our daily lives, sleep has been further disrupted. The latest National Sleep Survey 2020, partnered with The Sleep Charity and Sleepstation, has found that 70% of children under 16 are going to bed later than they were before the pandemic, and many are also waking up later. This indicates the impact of COVID-19 on our children's sleep routines and habits.

Q. So how can I help get my child to sleep? How do I get their sleep cycle on track for school?

Understandably, parents and carers are frequently asking these questions. When trying to consider how you can help with your child's sleep, improving **sleep hygiene** is usually the first place to start. Sleep hygiene is about promoting the physiological cues in our bodies, which help us sleep and reducing factors which may be getting in the way of sleep. Here are some of the common questions asked in relation to sleep difficulties and the sleep hygiene strategies that can help: -

Q. Should I be allowing my child to play on their devices just before bed?

- ♦ **Limit screen time just before bed**- screens emit blue light which gets in the way of the hormones which help us get to sleep by signalling to the brain via our eyes. Having 1-2 hours before bed with limited screen time is important for sleep.

Q. Is there anything I can do to my child's bedroom to help them sleep better?

- **Reduce the light**- light is an important cue for sleep. Limiting light at night, and allowing natural light in the morning at wake-up time helps the sleep-wake cycle. Using black out blinds or curtains can help to minimise light getting into the room when your child needs to sleep
- **Keep cool**-generally, people sleep better in a cool environment so check that your child is wearing comfortable clothes for the time of year and take off any extra blankets if they are not needed

Q. Is there anything my children should avoid eating or drinking before bed, to help them to sleep?

- **Avoid caffeine** in food and drinks before bed and this includes tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks and chocolate. These are stimulants and they affect the brain and body, making us feel more alert and this makes it harder for us to get to sleep. This goes for adults too!

Q. What can I do if my child is worried or restless at the time that they need to be going to bed?

- **Keep them active during the day**- if the body is active in the day, it is more likely to feel tired at night so encourage physical exercise during the day
- **Create a 'wind-down' hour before bed**-this can help the body relax and feel sleepy. Winding down can involve activities which are soothing and not too stimulating, such as talking to others, listening to relaxing sounds, or having a bath. Mindfulness and sleep meditations have become increasingly popular and exercises can be freely accessed through apps and audios.
- **Allow time in the day to talk about their worries or struggles**- As soon as our heads hit the pillow, it is natural for the brain to start thinking about the day and what may come tomorrow, and sometimes these thoughts can be quite negative. Creating time to speak to your young person before they go to bed, preferably a few hours before, about any worries or emotions they may be experiencing is helpful.
- **Use the bedroom primarily for sleep**- If our bedrooms also become a work space and a play space, then this can weaken the association your brain has with the bed being for sleep. If its not possible to separate these activities from your bedroom, then it is important that before bed any work books or activities are cleared away. As Dr Gavriloff points out "spending time in your

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bedroom **not sleeping** (e.g. working, worrying, watching television, eating etc.) is likely to weaken that association between bed and sleep which will make it less easy for the body to predict when sleep is going to take place".

♦ **Use a flexible routine**- this means aiming to go to bed and wake up at a similar time each day. This routine does not need to be strictly enforced as naturally we can feel more tired some days compared to others, however having too much variation in when you go to bed and wake up each day can cause problems.

Q. If I need my child to start waking up earlier when they return to school, what is the best way to do this?

♦ **Gradually shift the sleep cycle**-if you want to help your child sleep earlier so they can wake up earlier, a familiar challenge for any parent, then this change needs to be gradual. It is more helpful to start the change from waking up. Changes of 15 to 30 minutes every few days can help gradually shift the sleeping pattern.

♦ **Resist the urge to force sleep**- When we wake up in the night, it's very frustrating and it can be natural to tell ourselves or our children to just try go back to sleep. However, if we are alert and not sleepy then this will likely only cause more frustration. Although it feels counterintuitive, it can be more helpful to get out of bed and do something else, which is not too stimulating and does not involve bright lights, until you start to feel sleepy again.

Q. My child keeps having the same distressing nightmare and it interrupts their sleep. Is there anything I can do to help them?

♦ **Yes, there is.** Nightmares are a common problem young people can face. If your child wakes up from a nightmare, then its natural they may want some reassurance and support in the moment. It is important to remind them their dream was not real and help them connect to the current moment and to reassure them that they are safe. If someone is experiencing a re-occurring nightmare then this can be responded to in the day by helping that young person talk through their dream. One technique is to write it or draw it out, and to create their own more positive ending to the dream, or to add humour to it. *Exposure* to bad dreams is more helpful than *avoiding them* as thinking and talking about them can itself reduce the felt distress they cause. Writing a more positive ending to the dream (often called re-scripting) that increases a sense of control can also be helpful. This is most effective if the ending draws on the senses to create a vivid picture and is rehearsed repeatedly and read before bedtime.

So, encourage your child to talk about what they can see, hear, smell and feel in the new ending to increase their control over how the dream ends next time.

It is important to acknowledge that everyone has their own sleep habits and preferences. The suggestions above can be useful guidance, but it is not a 'one size fits all' approach for sleep, and it is important each person works out what works best for them. You may encourage your child or young person to trial using certain techniques, and experiment with what does and doesn't work. This way, they can have a role in influencing their sleep and change is more likely to occur.

So, it's simple right?

Unfortunately, not. Sleep is complex and there are many factors which could be playing a role in sleep difficulties. Often it can take time and patience for strategies to start having an impact. As parents, it's important not to place too much responsibility on yourself fixing your young person's sleep. Be kind to yourself and know that there will be many other parents out there who are going through similar difficulties.

Q Where can I find more information about sleep?

Useful resources on sleep and related topics can be found at the websites below: -

https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/kids-bedtimes-creeping-later-and-technology-on-the-up-amidst-covid-19-crisis/

https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/sleep-problems/

https://www.sleepstation.org.uk

https://www.nhs.uk

References

A Guide to Good Sleep during the Covid-19 pandemic by Dr Dimitri Gavriloff, Clinical Psychologist (2020). Accessed via www.emergingminds.org.uk

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