



Sleep Problems in Childhood and Adolescence

Information for anyone who lives and/or works with children and young people

How much sleep does my child need?

The amount of sleep needed gradually decreases from infancy to adulthood. Every child is different but as a general rule of thumb:

- Toddlers need about 12 - 14 hours sleep (including daytime naps)
- Pre-schoolers (aged 3 - 5) need 11 - 12 hours sleep
- School-aged children need 10 - 11 hours sleep
- Teenagers need 9 - 10 hours sleep.

Why cant my child sleep?

There are different reasons:

- Very young children often fear being left alone at night. This is called 'separation anxiety' and is normal at a young age.
- Bedtime fears - many young children are afraid of the dark.
- Bad habits - napping too much during the day.
- 'I'm not sleepy' - you might find that when your child gets very tired, they get irritable, aggressive or even overactive (hence the phrase 'overtired')

Why sleep problems matter

Sleep problems are very common. Most children's sleep problems happen only occasionally. They are not serious and get better on their own, with time. If they don't, you need to take them seriously. As well as being upsetting, they may interfere with your child's learning and behaviour. There may be underlying physical or mental health problems.

What can I do to help my child sleep better?

It's important that your child has a regular sleep routine.

- Decide on regular times for going to bed and getting up, and stick to these times.
- Develop a consistent, relaxing bedtime routine with your child. This should start with quiet time to help your child to wind down; for example, a bath followed by a short bedtime story before you say goodnight. This helps children to settle, and should end with your child falling asleep without the need for you to be with them.
- It is important to be loving, but firm, about when it is time for your child to settle down for the night. When your child cries out, it is important to be sure that they are not wet, ill or in pain. It is best to do this quickly, while still comforting and reassuring them. Don't spend too much time with them or take them into your bed, because this will reward them for being awake.
- A dummy can help to conform young infants who wake needing to suck. Once you have weaned your child onto solid foods, it is best not to give them a bottle or dummy at night - if they wake and can't find it, they will probably start crying. A cuddly toy or favourite blanket can often help young children to cope with their separation anxiety.

How can I help a teenager sleep better?

- Agree with them reasonable and consistent bedtimes, for weekdays and weekends.
- Most teenagers like to have a 'lie-in' at weekends - limiting the getting up time to only an hour or two later than weekdays will ensure they can get into a stable sleep routine.
- Help them to get into a routine of 30 minutes 'quiet time' before bed - no TV, texting, homework or computer use.
- They should avoid daytime napping
- Getting some fresh air, gentle exercise and daylight each day will help them to sleep at night.
- They should avoid caffeine and heavy exercise for 4 hours before bed, as these can cause problems getting to sleep.
- Encourage them to do their worrying before getting into bed - perhaps by writing a 'to do list' for the following day earlier in the evening.

Where can I get help?

Your GP or Health Visitor can offer advice and help. If things don't get better, your GP or another professional can refer your child for a specialist opinion from a Paediatrician or local child mental health services. This will help to find out exactly what the problem is and how it can be best resolved.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2013). Mental Health and Growing Up: Factsheets for Parents, Teachers and Young People (4th ed.). Cambridge: Royal College of Psychiatrists.

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01642 505580



info@redcarlink.com



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