Making Life Better Together

NHS South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust

Understanding Sleep in Children and Young Adults - A Guide for Parents



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Top Sleep Hygiene Tips: How to sleep well for children & teenagers

How many hours of sleep does a young person need? - Take time to understand how much sleep your child actually needs before you adjust anything else.

Age group	Age range	Recommended hours of sleep per 24 hours
School-age	6-12 years	9-12 hours
Teen	13-18 years	8-10 hours
Adult	18 years and older	7 hours or more

What is Sleep Hygiene?

- Sleep hygiene involves everything we do to take care of our sleep and sleep cycles. All of our habits and routines that encourage regulation and sleepiness at the end of the day count towards our sleep hygiene.

Why is Sleep Hygiene Important?

- Sleep hygiene keeps our brain, hormones, and circadian rhythm healthy.
- Poor sleep hygiene causes poor sleep, inflammation in the brain, disruptions in our hormone cycles, difficulty waking, and more.
- For Neurodivergent people, it is especially important to maintain healthy sleep hygiene because of their increased sensitivities, genetic vulnerabilities to sleep disorders, etc.

Sleep Hygiene Tips:

- **Avoid caffeine after lunch** - Caffeine is a stimulant that prevents sleep. It can cause your teenager to stay awake for longer and struggle to fall asleep.

Caffeine is in drinks such as tea, coffee, energy drinks and fizzy drinks. If your child drinks these, try to limit their intake or avoid them all together after lunchtime.

- **Avoid eating a large meal before bedtime** – This can prevent sleep. You should consider the best time to have a meal, if you are having a large meal, try to ensure that it is eaten over an hour before your child's sleep routine starts.
- **Encourage your child to only use their bed for sleeping** - It can be tempting for your teenager to take naps or rest in their bed outside of bedtime. This can affect how easily they fall asleep and their quality of sleep. Encourage them to use a beanbag or comfy chair to rest in instead of their bed.
- **Exercise throughout the day, but not just before bedtime** - young people can have difficulty falling asleep if they have been inactive throughout the day. Try encouraging your child, where possible, to take part in sports and play outside. This can help to burn off energy. If your child isn't very 'sporty', a walk in the fresh air or a little dance party can be helpful. However, exercise should be avoided directly before bedtime as this can make it harder for your child to calm down and prevent them from falling asleep.
- **Introduce calming activities during the day to help with stress** - Stress can affect sleep. Adding calming activities such as journaling during the day to allow them to unwind, even 10 minutes can be helpful.

Optimising the bedroom:

- **Lighting:** Aim for dim or warm lights as bedtime approaches. You might find black-out curtains helpful in blocking out external light, or consider using a nightlight if total darkness isn't comfortable.
- **Noise:** Minimizing loud and distracting sounds can foster a more peaceful sleep environment. Options like white noise machines or a simple fan can provide a consistent sound that helps mask disruptions. Calming music or earplugs may also be beneficial, especially in noisier environments.
- **Temperature:** Avoid extremes and choose appropriate bedding for the season to maintain comfort throughout the night.
- **Aroma:** Essential oils or pillow sprays can create a soothing atmosphere conducive to sleep.
- **Reduce stimulation** in the bedroom. Removing temptations and distractions will help signal to the body and mind that it's time to wind down.

Remember, these adjustments are about creating a calming and inviting space that supports healthy sleep habits and you don't have to try them all at once.

Sleep Routine

A sleep routine is the consistent rituals we perform before bed, it's intended to soothe and regulate the body. Showering, brushing your teeth, and getting into comfy pjs may make up part of your sleep routine.

Sleep routines prime the brain and body for sleep. In the evening, when we begin our routines to get ready for bed, these actions signal to the brain that we're about to sleep. That way, when we climb into bed, our brains and bodies are ready.

Neurodiverse people often have a delayed onset of melatonin. This means that they often struggle to fall asleep because their brains need time to begin producing melatonin. Getting a good night's sleep helps offset this vulnerability.

It's important to note that **too much change at the same time can be overwhelming** for the body! If you're trying to introduce things into your child's sleep routine, **start small and be gradual**. The aim of building a new sleep routine is to be consistent and intend to soothe and regulate the body.

For younger children, routines must start 30-60 minutes before bed and may include set activities such as brushing teeth, bedtime story, saying goodnight.

Sleep Diaries

- Sleep diaries can be used to establish any unusual patterns of sleep and identify factors which may be influencing your child's ability to sleep. If you are using other strategies to aid sleep, you will be able to track how effective they are.
- Sleep diaries are also useful because you can show them to professionals such as teachers, GPs or social workers, to give them a clearer idea of the impact sleep issues are having on your lives.

Complete the diary each morning ("Day 1" will be your first morning). Don't worry too much about giving exact answers, an estimate will do.

Day: **Date:**	**Monday**	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**	**Saturday**	**Sunday**
Sleepy during the day (Yes/No)							
Duration of any daytime sleep							
Time of any snacking. (e.g. chocolate, fizzy drinks, tea, coffee, sweets)							
Daytime activities							
Activities 1 hour before bedtime							
Time to bed							
Times woke up in the night							
How long did your child stay up for when waking in the night?							
Time awake in the morning							
Mood on waking							
Night time sleep duration							
What did you do to aid your child's sleep? Give a score of 0-5							

0 = Did not help							

Managing your own sleep

- If you are a parent of a neurodivergent young person who is not sleeping, it is highly likely that you are also not sleeping well either.
- When you make any plans, try to be realistic with what you know you can achieve, even when you are exhausted, as **consistency** will be the **key to success.**
- Lack of sleep can have a negative impact on your mental and physical health, so also think about ways you can look after yourself and be kind to yourself.

Additional resources to learn more:

- **The Sleep Charity** - https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/our-courses/
- **NHS** – How to get to sleep https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to get-to-sleep/
- **National Autistic Society** – sleep and autism https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and guidance/topics/physical-health/slee
- **Mind** https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of mental-health-problems/sleep-problems/about-sleep-and mental-health/
- **YouTube** – How to get to sleep when you have ADHD https://youtu.be/zbhUFX6ZRYA
- **YouTube** – Sleep difficulties in Autism Spectrum Disorder https://youtu.be/fhgRVxYW_HI
- **10 medical reasons for feeling tired** – NHS https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/10- medical-reasons-for-feeling-tired/
- **Royal College of Psychiatry** – Sleeping Well https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems disorders/sleeping-well