Helping Your Child with ADHD Sleep Better: A Parent's Guide

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Source of Information:

ADHD Foundation, AdditudeMAG and *ADDISS*

Why Sleep Can Be Difficult for Children with ADHD

Children with ADHD can struggle with:

- A racing mind or difficulty “switching off”
- Sensory sensitivities to noise, light, movement, or textures
- Irregular circadian rhythms or delayed sleep cycles
- Impulsivity that makes settling challenging
- Rebound effects from stimulant medication
- Higher rates of nighttime anxiety or restlessness

Understanding these challenges can make bedtime more manageable and less stressful.

1. Build a Predictable, Calming Evening Routine

Routine is one of the strongest tools for improving sleep in children with ADHD.

Tips

- Keep the routine predictable and consistent
- Use timers or alarms (visual or sound-based) to signal transitions, such as “10 minutes until bedtime routine starts”
- Start wind-down time 60–90 minutes before bed
- Follow the same steps each night (bath → pyjamas → quiet activity → lights out)
- Use visual schedules or checklists to help your child follow the routine independently

Gradual transitions reduce overwhelm and help the brain shift into “rest mode”.

2. Create a Sensory-Friendly Sleep Environment

Children with ADHD may be more sensitive to sensory input.

Consider:

- Soft, warm lighting

- Blackout curtains for a dark room
- White noise machines, nature sounds, or binaural beats to mask disruptive sounds and create a consistent auditory environment
- Comfortable, non-irritating bedding
- Weighted blanket (if comforting and appropriate)
- A tidy sleeping area to minimise visual stimulation

Calming soundtracks such as gentle hums, rainfall, or low-frequency binaural tones can be particularly grounding for children with a busy or anxious mind.

3. Use Calming Audio and Sleep Apps

Guided meditation and relaxation audios can help the ADHD brain settle down.

Helpful resources:

- Headspace (child-friendly calming sessions, mindfulness stories)
- Calm (sleep stories, breathing exercises, relaxation music)
- Insight Timer (free library of calming tracks)

These tools can be used during wind-down time or for a brief check-in before lights out.

4. Support Healthy Daytime Habits

What happens in the day affects sleep at night.

Try to include:

- Regular physical activity
- Exposure to natural light in the morning
- Hydration throughout the day
- Balanced meals, including protein to stabilise energy

- Avoiding long naps or naps too late in the day

If possible, keep wake and sleep times consistent, even on weekends.

5. Be Thoughtful About Screen Time

Screens can overstimulate the ADHD brain, impacting sleep quality.

Recommendations:

- Turn off screens at least one hour before bed
- Avoid stimulating or fast-paced content in the evening
- Use “night mode” or reduced brightness if screens must be used

Replacing screens with quiet, calming activities helps the child’s nervous system unwind.

6. Consider Medication Timing

Stimulant medication can influence evening behaviour and sleep.

Suggestions:

- Monitor and log sleep changes
- Discuss timing or dosage questions with the prescribing clinician
- Never adjust medication without medical guidance

The right schedule can make a noticeable difference to bedtime calmness.

7. Help Your Child Manage Emotions Before Bed

Evening anxiety and busy thoughts can prevent sleep.

Try:

- A short “worry time space” earlier in the evening.
    - A “worry box” outside the bedroom can also help release concerns.
- Use Calming Scents: Some children respond well to soothing smells like lavender or chamomile. Use only child-safe essential oils or natural pillow sprays (check for sensitivity first).
- Journaling or Drawing :
    - Drawing or writing a quick “brain dump”.
    - Provide a notebook for your child to draw or write about their day, especially if they tend to ruminate or worry at night.
- Try a Weighted Blanket or Compression Sheets. These can provide a calming “hug” sensation, which may help children feel secure. Always consult with an occupational therapist before use, especially for younger children.
- Deep breathing, stretches, or guided relaxation:
    - Deep Breathing: Teach slow belly breathing: “Smell the flower… blow out the candle.” Use apps or videos designed for children’s guided breathing.
    - Progressive Muscle Relaxation: Guide your child to tense and relax different body parts, starting from toes to head. Can be made playful: “Squeeze your toes like you’re holding a marble!”
    - Guided Imagery: Ask your child to imagine a calm, happy place like a beach, forest, or floating cloud. Use child-friendly guided audio recordings if helpful.
- Gentle Movement or Stretching:
    - Yoga poses or light stretching can relax the body before bed.
    - Try poses like “child’s pose”.
- Soft music, white noise, or binaural beats to help the mind settle

This helps prevent emotional overload at the moment of bedtime.

8. Build Positive Sleep Associations

Children with ADHD respond well to consistent cues.

Encourage:

- Bed for sleeping only—not for homework, screens, or play
- A simple bedtime phrase repeated nightly
- A calm, predictable lights-out routine
- Timers or visual cues to let children know when each step happens.
- Avoid Sleep as a Punishment:
    - Keep bedtime a positive and safe experience.
    - Reinforce bedtime routines with praise or reward charts if needed.

9. When to Seek Additional Support

Consider speaking with the GP if your child shows:

- Persistent difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Snoring or breathing pauses
- Sleepwalking, night terrors, or frequent nightmares
- Severe daytime sleepiness
- Extreme behavioural changes related to fatigue

A clinician can explore possible conditions such as sleep disorders, anxiety, or sensory challenges.

Final Note for Parents

Sleep difficulties are very common for children with ADHD, and they do not reflect poor parenting. ADHD brains function differently, and small, compassionate adjustments can make a significant difference over time.

Celebrate progress, adapt strategies when needed, and remember that every child's sleep journey is unique!