



St. Michael's House: Children's and Young Person's Services

Tips and Ideas to Support Sleep

Responding to Sleep Challenges During COVID 19



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Introduction: Sleep Challenges During COVID19



Many families have reported changes in their child's sleep pattern due to changes in routine, due to restrictions associated with the COVID19 Pandemic. In response to this, we have developed this resource of tips and ideas to support better sleep. We hope families may find this helpful when trying to problem solve recent sleep issues. We understand sleep is complex; the intended purpose of this document is to help children who were once good sleepers, but whose sleep may be disrupted by the current situation. However, the tips may also be helpful to consider for children who have experienced long term sleep difficulties. As a parent you can read through these strategies and consider what fits best for you and your situation.

Your child may have slept well previously or may have had some sleep challenges in the past which have increased, such as difficulty settling to sleep or waking overnight. It is important to remember that recent sleep changes are related to lifestyle changes. These changes are not a result of something you are doing wrong. You have likely been doing a lot of things right and you are probably already doing a lot of these tips and ideas. It is important to stick to the things you already do well (and to congratulate yourself for this). Right now your child is getting less of certain things such as outings, exercise, school etc. This means families may need to do more of other things to promote better sleep. The strategies are based on research that has shown help all people sleep better, not just children.

Sleep difficulties are very challenging for parents, especially in the current situation when there is no break or opportunity for rest during the day. If you would like increased support, please link with your key contact in St Michael's House, who can talk you through your concerns, and put you in contact with the most appropriate member of the clinical team.

On the other hand, you may not feel ready to tackle sleep issues right now. We understand that tackling a sleep issue requires significant effort, physically and mentally. You may not want to add any demands to the home situation. You may prefer to put up with the situation until you are ready and that is OK too. These tips and ideas will be useful whenever you are ready to use them. You decide when the time is right.



Day Time

It may seem counter intuitive to start with the day time when trying to fix night time, but remember the day time is what has changed most, so that is where the focus should be. Day time routines make a significant difference to how well a child sleeps.

Tips and Ideas:

1. Make sure there is a clear routine during the day

The routine does not have to be very busy or full but there should be a clear, predictable order to the day with key events happening at specific times.

Key events include: waking up, meal times, bed time, exercise time, work times, play times, screen time, outside time, bath time and quiet time.

It is very important that children wake up at a set time each morning.

Once you decide the routine, you need to communicate it to the child. Consider using a visual schedule using photographs, pictures, symbols or words, depending on what makes most sense to your child.

2. Physical Activity / Exercise

It is important to build physical activity into the day. It is best to exercise early in the day if possible. Try not to exercise too close to bed time (2/3 hours beforehand at latest) as the body temperature will remain high and could prevent sleep. Exercise can also be stimulating for children and before bedtime it is important to reduce stimulation.

If you are in a position to do so, try to do some exercise outside as the sunlight is helpful in setting the body's natural sleep cycle. Not everyone is in this position at the moment however.

If you need ideas for exercise or live in a small space that means exercising is difficult, please see the St. Michael's House website, Covid 19 Support Pages: The CYP and Family Supports Section has lots of Activity Resources.





3. Supporting Sensory and Movement Needs

Activities that include deep pressure, resistive muscle work and movement throughout the day have been shown to have a positive impact on sleep. These can be incorporated throughout the day as well as during exercise time. If your child is supported to be calm and alert all day, it will be easier to be calm and relaxed at bedtime and during the night.

Please see some activity ideas below

- Bouncing on a trampoline
- Yoga ball/ peanut ball activities
- Propelling on a scooter board
- Climbing
- Wheelbarrow walks
- Tug of war
- Swings
- Obstacle Courses
- Animal walks
- Completing fine motor activities when lying and supporting upper body through elbows
- Wall push ups
- Massage with pillow
- Blowing Bubbles
- Playing football
- Gardening
- Emptying washing machine
- Wash windows

Incorporating these activities into the routine, and making them part of a schedule is more likely to be successful.

4. Screen time

All children are having more screen time than usual at present and it is important that parents don't feel guilty about that. However, screen time too close to bed time makes sleeping more difficult. Consider reducing screen time for at least one to two hours before bedtime.





Screen time may also be preventing your child participating in other parts of the daily routine, so limiting it to set times during the day may be worth considering.

If your child needs a screen as part of the evening or bedtime routine consider reducing the brightness of the device to reduce the blue light.

4. Diet

Avoid consuming anything with caffeine (cola, chocolate, tea, coffee, hot chocolate) in the late afternoon and throughout the evening. It can still cause night time awakenings and shallow sleep, even if it doesn't prevent a child falling asleep.

Sugar filled foods are not helpful either, so biscuits, sweets, cakes should be limited in the run up to bedtime. Fizzy drinks and cordials can aggravate the bladder causing wetting during the night.

A filling snack as part of the bedtime routine may help ensure your child does not wake up hungry during the night.

Drinks before bedtime should be limited (but not eliminated) to avoid your child waking frequently to urinate or in response to a full nappy.

These foods have been shown to be helpful in supporting sleep: almonds, bananas, dairy products, porridge, cherries and cereal (no sugar).

Daytime Routine Summary:

- *Make sure there is a clear routine during the day, that key events happen at a consistent time, and that the routine is communicated to your child.*
- *Encourage physical activity and exercise.*
- *Help your child meet their sensory and movement needs.*
- *Reduce screentime, particularly before bedtime.*
- *Avoid caffeine and sugar in your child's diet, and that your child is full going to bed.*



The Bedroom

Bedrooms should be cool, quiet and calm environments.

Try lying in your child's bed to see what it is like. Think about what you can see, what you can feel, what you can hear, what you can smell. Are these things helpful or unhelpful for sleep?



Think about what changes you might reasonably be able to make at the present time. It is not necessary to re-design the bedroom, a few small changes may add up to make a big difference. Your child may also share the room with a sibling and any changes have to work for your other children too.

Cool:

The ideal room temperature is 16-18 degrees Celsius.

Consider the radiators, the windows, the bedcovers, the pyjamas etc to make sure your child is not too hot or too cold. Remember that the weather has changed recently and we may not have updated pyjamas, duvet covers, heating timers, radiator settings etc.

Quiet:

It is best if there is no TV or tablet or any screen in your child's room. If there is a screen in the room, it is best if the screen is off at bedtime.

Consider how noise travels in the house and what can be changed without disrupting everyone else in the household. Again, small changes can be considered for example, siblings using headphones for screens, laundry being washed during the day rather than in the evening, doors closed downstairs.

Some children like calming noises at bedtime, such as white noise or quiet music.

The room may need to be 'quiet' visually too. Distracting items like toys and posters may need to be removed from the room.

Calm:

It is important that beds are for sleeping. Lying on a bed and doing other activities (e.g., watching TV, using a tablet or computer) makes it hard for your brain to associate your bed with sleep.



Dark:

Dark is best for sleep. As summer continues, it is brighter longer and hard to ensure the bedroom is dark. Blackout blinds can be very helpful but may be difficult to purchase at present. Parents can become very resourceful using materials around the house to help block the light from the windows.

However, some children can be anxious in complete darkness, so an open door or a night light can be helpful. If using a night light, pink/red lights are best and blue/white bulbs should be avoided. Blue/green lampshades can be helpful for children who are particularly light sensitive.

As much as possible, it is important that the environment at bedtime is the same as the environment during the night. So whatever is in the room when your child falls asleep should also be in the room if/when your child wakes during the night. This will make it easier for your child to go back to sleep. For this same reason, it is important that your child falls asleep in his/her own bed rather than on the couch, in your arms or in your bed.

The Bedroom Environment Summary:

- *Ensure the bedroom is cool, quiet, calm and dark.*
- *Consider the features of your child's bedroom that support/hinder sleep.*



Evening Routines

1. Bed time

Bedtime may be later than usual at the moment, but it should be at the same time every night, even on weekends. (Remember that having consistent waking times is also very important for sleep).

If your child is lying awake tossing and turning, consider delaying bedtime by 30 minutes each night until the child is tired enough that he/she falls asleep quickly and easily. You don't want tossing and turning to become part of the routine. Once your child is going to sleep easier you can gradually move bed time earlier again.

2. Routine

There should be a set routine every night. This is crucial. This is how the body knows sleep is coming and begins to feel sleepy.

The bedtime routine should start at least one hour before the child gets in to bed. The aim is to spend time doing quieter, less stimulating and more relaxing activities. Pick a set of activities such as, bath, snack, pyjamas, brush teeth, read book, massage, and bed. Decide the order that they happen and stick to this order every night. The order is important as you want more relaxing activities to happen as you get closer to bedtime if possible. For example, if your child gets stressed with teeth brushing then maybe brush them earlier in the evening and not just before bed. Write down the order so everyone involved with your child's sleep routine can follow the same sequence.

Consider how the child will know the routine – consider developing a visual schedule specifically for the bedtime routine, using photographs, pictures, symbols or words, depending on what makes most sense to your child. The last part of the routine should be the child falling asleep in his/her own bed. Finish bed time with a tuck in, hug, kiss and a key phrase or key word that signifies the end of the routine. At this time parents should become boring, uninteresting and provide no stimulation

bedtime checklist

brush teeth 	pajamas 	get a drink 
set out clothes 	read a story 	lullaby 
hugs & kisses 	night light 	lights out 

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3. Relaxing Activities

It is important to build in relaxing activities to the bedtime routine. Each child will find different things calming but activities to consider include



- A bath 30 minutes before bed is perfect for aiding sleep. The decrease in body temperature after getting out of a bath makes us feel sleepy around half an hour later.
- Fine motor skill activities such as jigsaws, colouring, building Lego, playdough, pipecleaner arts & crafts etc. can be very relaxing and great activities to do together.
- Breathing exercises - your child may need a visual e.g. Smell the flowers, blow out the candles.
- Bedtime stories and bed time songs are always very relaxing and involve connection with your child which can be reassuring. Another similar idea is playing Simon says with simple actions.

Sensory activities can be helpful - consider all the senses and your own child's sensory preferences:

Sound:

- Noises that are rhythmic, predictable, quiet and familiar.
- Nature sounds, relaxation music, white noise, relax and sleep apps

Smell:

- Lavender oil -place in bath, spray bottle or on tissue in pillowcase; mix with a body cream for bedtime massage.
- For children who find it hard when parents leave, add parent's perfume to pillow or put a parent's t-shirt around the pillow so it will smell of the parent or swap parents and child's pillow so the child can smell their parent

Touch:

- Some children like a hot water bottle before bed
- Avoid tickles or light touch before bed as this can be stimulating.
- Firm touch or deep pressure can be helpful

Deep pressure:

- Increase push, pull and heavy lifting activities during the day and coming up to bedtime



- Trial tucking your child tight in the bed either around their body or tuck the duvet under the mattress either side
- Squashing child's body (not head) in bed with pillow and then take the pillows away
- Roll child up in duvet, towel or blanket (with head out) and then unroll them
- Use a roller on back and legs
- Simple and slow yoga
- Massage
- For safety, avoid using weighted blanket when a child is sleeping. If you are considering using weighted equipment, contact your key contact clinician who can discuss with the occupational therapist.

Movement:

- Linear rhythmic movement can improve time taken to get to sleep
- Rocking on a rocking horse or in a rocking chair, and swinging forwards and backwards in a rhythm.

Bedtime Routine Summary:

- *Keep the time of bedtime consistent every night.*
- *Stick to a bedtime routine, the same sequence of activities every night.*
- *Include relaxing activities in the bedtime routine.*



Bedtime and Over-Night



Bedtime, and the overnight response, can often be the hardest part to change. Everyone wakes at night. Most people get back to sleep so easily and quickly that they don't really notice they were awake. This is because they fell asleep at bedtime without help. So when they wake at night they don't need help either. Long term, we want this for our children. We want them to be able to fall asleep independently in their own bed at bedtime and during the night. This is a milestone that each child reaches at very individual times. There are strategies we can use to help nudge our children towards this goal.

There are two ways we can do this. Pick the one that suits you and your child. Both work if you are consistent. The key is sticking to it, so pick the one that you think you can stick to best, over a consistent period of time. You will apply the same strategy at bedtime that you will use in the overnight period if your child wakes up.

For both options, it is very important to make sure all of your children needs are met prior to bedtime in relation to thirst, hunger, toileting and emotional comfort/interaction.

Option 1. Controlled Comforting

- Settle your child in bed and leave the room immediately after the bedtime routine has ended.
- If your child calls or cries or gets out of the bed either at bedtime or during the night, return to the room, re-settle your child, use the bedtime key phrase and leave immediately again.
- Make sure you are boring and brief. Don't interact too much, verbally or physically.
- Repeat this as many times as is necessary until the child falls asleep.
- This approach takes commitment if the child objects but will probably take fewer nights to take effect than option 2:

Option 2. Gradual Distancing

- Settle your child in bed and after the bedtime routine is over, remain in the room with the child but be very boring and quiet.



- Over a number of nights, gradually increase the distance between yourself and your child as he/she falls asleep. For example moving from lying on the bed, to sitting on the bed, to sitting beside the bed, to sitting by the door, to sitting outside the door. You can decide the pace which works for you and your child.
- If the child objects, resettle him/her, use the bedtime key phrase and return to your spot in the room. Make sure you are boring and brief.
- If the child calls or cries or gets out of bed during the night follow the exact same plan as at bedtime.
- This option takes longer but may lead to fewer objections from the child.

It may be helpful when trying these strategies, to draw attention to the difference between the night and day. At night it remains dark and quiet with boring parents. But in the morning make a big deal of turning on lights, opening curtains, talking at regular volume and being more animated and active.

If your child benefits from using a reward system in school or during the day, it may be beneficial to consider using a similar system to encourage your child to fall asleep and stay asleep in their own bed. Speak to your key contact if this is something you require assistance to explore.

Night Time Routines Summary

Changing bedtime and responding overnight can be the hardest part of sleep routines to change.

We want to help our children learn to fall asleep on their own, in their own beds.

There are two main options for supporting this: 1; controlled comforting and 2: gradual distancing.

Ensure your child's needs are met before bedtime to increase chance of success.



Further Support

We hope this document is helpful in identifying areas where sleep can be improved during the current situation. We welcome any feedback you have about this document as we are currently developing our intervention pathways in relation to sleep.

If you feel you require any additional support, please contact your key contact/key worker in St. Michael's House. The referral process for additional support will depend on your service area (e.g. Early Services or School Age).

If you do not know who your key contact/worker is currently, please contact your local SMH headquarters:

Ballymun	01-8840200
Coolock	01-8770500
Goatstown	01-2990500

Useful Websites:

<https://www.smh.ie/services/children/covid-19-family-supports/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/supporting-someone-with-special-needs-during-covid19.html>