Positive sleep associations for children

Sleep problems occur for various reasons. To ensure good sleep, children need a consistent approach to bedtime and sleep.

- We need to give the brain positive links to sleep. This includes a predictable bedtime routine and the same night time conditions all night long.
- When children learn their sleep skills, they will make associations with things, surroundings and sounds that act as prompts for sleep. These associations can be helpful and sustainable, or they become hard to maintain. For example, a special toy, comforter or dummy.
- Sometimes these associations are dependent on a parent or difficult to sustain. For example, requiring a parent to stay in the room until asleep, or needing to be cuddled to sleep when children wake during the night.
- Parents and care givers can help a child learn to have sleep associations where they don't necessarily need to have an adult's presence during the night.
- The response to settling at bedtime or for any night time wake ups is very important. Responses will either make the wakeful behaviour more likely to continue or will help the child learn better sleep skills.
- We all wake during the night. Most don't notice this. For those who wake fully, bear in mind what you do will affect the chance of the behaviour being repeated.



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Bedroom environment

The right sleep environment will help your child relax and fall asleep and back to sleep. Here is a checklist for the things to consider:

- A dark enough room. Use blackout blinds to reduce the amount of light in the room.
- For children afraid of the dark, use a small red-based night light.
- Keep the room calm and tidy. A child needs to associate their bedroom with sleep and bedtime. Avoid distractions in the room like lots of toys, too many posters on the walls.
- Avoid screens (phones, tablets, TVs) in the room.
- Have a teddy or soft toy.
- A comfortable bed with appropriate bedding to ensure your child is neither too hot or cold.
- Consider noise. Are there any distracting sounds in the room?
- Put a family photo in the room so they know you're not far away.



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Getting the timings right and bedtime routine

The right bedtime routine will act as a clear signal to the brain that it's time to sleep, and an appropriate bed time will ensure your child is sleepy enough to fall asleep and stay asleep. Below is a suggested routine and sleep duration recommendations.

Example bedtime routine:

- 1 hour before bedtime dim lights and turn down the noise. Close curtains and engage in calming activities.
- Bedtime snack and drink ideally not sugary or sweet.
- Bath and pyjamas.
- Read a story together in child's bedroom (be clear how many stories you will read or for how long story time will last).
- Child into bed, lights out.

If your child struggles to accept bedtime, you can use visual prompts like a bedtime routine story.

Recommended sleep durations, including naps:

1 to 2 years	11 to 14 hours
3 to 5 years	10 to 13 hours



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Boundaries and expectations

Children feel safe and secure when they have clear, firm boundaries. This is especially true at bedtime. Again, the consistent, predictable bedtime routine applies. You need to be clear on your expectations for your children at bedtime and during the night.

Toddlers and preschool aged children especially like to test boundaries and like to feel they have choice and are listened to. It can help to think of ways to offer choice within boundaries.

For example:

"We're going to read 2 stories before bed, which of these books would you like to read tonight?"

If your child then gets upset because they want more stories before bed, you can be firm but kind.

For example:

"I know you love story time. We can't read more now because it's time to go to sleep. I'm going to take these books downstairs with me so that we can read them tomorrow morning."



Sleep strategies: If your child is reliant on you being there when they fall asleep

If your child is reliant on your presence to fall asleep, they will look for this throughout the night. You can move away, in stages, over several nights, so they become less dependent on your presence over time.

- After the bedtime routine, turn out the lights and sit next to your child whilst they settle to sleep.
- You are a comforting presence but do not get actively involved. Possibly keep your head down and hands in your lap.
- Whenever your child wakes in the night sit in the same position until your child is asleep.
- Over several nights move further away from your child until you are out of the room and can come away completely.
- Keep moving in one direction: once you have moved away don't move back. Make sure they are settled with you in each position before you move on.



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Sleep strategies: Reassuring young children when they wake

This involves leaving your child at sleep times and coming back at timed intervals to reassure. If your child is in a bed, make sure the room is safe and a visible boundary like a stair gate can be better than closing the door.

- Say goodnight and come out of the room.
- If your child cries wait for 2 minutes before going back to briefly reassure
- Avoid too much interaction.
- Increase the time by a minute and repeat. Increase up to 15 minutes. Repeat until they go to sleep.
- Respond the same way whenever they wake in the night.

This is slightly different and involves leaving your child at sleep time and putting them back to bed when they try to get out.

- Consider use of an alarm system – wind chimes, ball with bell, tin containing cutlery or box with noisy toys at the door, so the parent can hear the child coming out of their room.
- If the child gets out of bed and cries or calls out: leave for 5 minutes.
- Then go to the child, take back to bed and say good night and leave. Do not engage with the child in any way.
- Keep repeating after every 10 minutes.
- Return the child immediately to their bed, every time the child leaves their room.



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Early mornings

Its normal to find it harder to get back to sleep in the early morning. These tips can help to stretch out your child's sleep however this is rarely a quick fix.

- Is your child hungry? Have they eaten enough the day before? This is particularly important for children at nursery. They have a main lunch time meal and snacky tea. They will want something else when they get home. Avoid sugary snacks, breadsticks and hummous, banana, toast, egg, cereal are all good options.
- How light is the room? It doesn't need to be completely dark but black out blinds will help.
- Temperature: make sure your child is not too hot or too cold, especially in the winter.
- A sunrise and sunset clock gives your child a visual cue when it is time to start the day. Have a realistic start time which you can adjust once they understand the concept. If your child is waking at 5am, start by setting it for 5.30am. Treat any waking before the clock light comes on as the middle of the night. Once the light comes on you can start the day. When they are happy to wait you can lengthen out the time by 10 minutes every 4 to 5 days. Anything from 6am is an acceptable time to start the day, especially in the summer months.
- Do not let your child overcompensate for an early start with extra day time sleep. A normal day time sleep can be brought forward by 20 to 30 minutes but don't add on extra nap time. You want them to consolidate that sleep during the night.
- Keep any interaction to a minimum and avoid eye contact. When you get your child up to start the day, make it an event so they know the social cues to look for.



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Rewards

Rewards help to motivate and encourage a positive behaviour and can be used alongside sleep strategies. It is really important to try sleep strategies for up to 4 nights at least. It takes this amount of time for a child to adjust.

- Think of a reward that will motivate your child. This could be stickers, small prize, lucky dip bag or an activity.
- Young children often need an instant reward and aren't capable of waiting to fill a chart. Make sure you choose something age appropriate.
- Explain to your child what the reward is for.
- If they managed to fulfil the expectation, they get the reward and lots of praise.
- If they didn't manage to get the reward, acknowledge the tricky night, that they don't get a reward, and carry on with your day.
- Once a reward is given it should not be taken away. Your child has earnt it.
- Don't give rewards for unwanted behaviour or for only partially meeting the set expectation. You will teach your child that they may do whatever they please.
- You may need to change the rewards if they stop working.



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Naps and dropping naps

Children will be ready to drop all naps anywhere between 18 months and 4 years old. Although most children tend to drop the nap between 2 to 3 years old.

Signs that your child might be ready to drop their nap can be them resisting the nap, struggling to fall asleep at bedtime and early morning wake ups. Adjusting to no naps during the day can be tricky at first for your toddler. During this transition, expect that your child will be grumpier in the afternoons. You might also consider whether bedtime should be brought forward a little earlier at this point.

If your child still naps, ensure that they never nap 4 hours before bedtime. This is to protect their night time sleep. It's also a good idea to ensure that naps do not last too long. If a child naps for several hours during the day, they will struggle to sleep well at night. Usually between 1 to 2 hours is a good nap length.

For older children, if they nap, make sure it's no later than 3pm, as it could affect night time sleep. A nap should be no longer than 90 minutes. If children regularly need daytime naps, they may not be getting enough sleep in the night. If in doubt, seek advice.



Illness and holidays

As much as possible, you want to maintain that good bedtime routine and encourage self-settling but sometimes it just doesn't go that way. There will be blips along the away, but these can help you get back on track.

- If you child is ill, layer in your help. Offer pain relief in necessary but try to give this to them in the bed or cot. If you child has been unwell during the day incorporate this into the bedtime routine
- Your child may need more TLC than normal but as much as possible try to get them into their bed awake, you can stay next to them if necessary.
- Don't return to offering milk in the night if this has been cut out. Water is always an option.
- If you child has a sickness bug, have sheets and change of clothes out for the night. If they are ill in bed, the clean-up can be quick and less disruptive. You could double make the bed with waterproof sheet and fitted sheet put on twice. In the night just the top set gets pulled off with a new set underneath.
- When sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings your child may be unsettled. If you use a scented sleep spray at bedtime at home, the same smell can be recreated in the new environment. A familiar sheet, toy and book can also help.
- Decide what is manageable. If your child wakes up in the night, are you in an environment where you want them to make any noise? Have a plan on back up in case this does happen and feel confident that you can get everything back on track once you are home.
- When back from holiday or over a period of illness, re-establish your normal bedtimes. It is normal for your child to need extra support if things have been different.



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Teen sleep for parents

Body clock (circadian rhythm). When children reach puberty their body clock advances, on average about 2 hours. This means that they will naturally want to go to bed later and get up later. We need to support them to manage this in everyday life.

Sleep needs. On average, taken over a two week period, teens need anything between 7 and 11 hours sleep. If they are constantly tired and falling asleep during the day they may not be getting enough sleep. Try to keep the number of hours sleep even – not 7 hours one night and 10 the next.

Signals for sleep. Make sure the bed is comfortable to sleep on. Keep clutter to a minimum as the room should be a peaceful haven for sleeping. For a good bedtime routine encourage the hour before bed as calm time. Dim lights, remove electronics and boost participation in quiet activities like listening to podcasts, Lego, mindful colouring. Keep the room at a cool temperature but not too cool that you are uncomfortable

Electronic equipment (such as tablets, phones and computers). Encourage the whole family to put away their phones in a specific place together before bedtime. Content from electronic use before bedtime stimulates the brain and the blue light emitted from devices can reduce melatonin production. The hormone melatonin is needed to enable us to fall asleep. Use an alarm clock to wake.

Set good sleep and wake times. Research shows that teens benefit from parenting support to maintain good sleep and wake times. Wake time is the most important and ideally this needs to be generally the same time over the whole week; have a lie in of an hour at the most.

Daytime affects night time. Its true that a stressful day can affect sleep. Help teens by introducing a 'down time' during the day, even a short time of just 10 minutes has been shown to be helpful. Some young people like to use a journal where they can write down hopes dreams and worries. Keep this to daytime and not when they are about to sleep.



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Teens: Help I can't sleep

Have I got a problem? Sleep is so important for mental and physical health its also crucial for learning, so when you can't sleep you may worry which will maybe add to sleep difficulty. Teens are supposed to have between 7 and 11 hours sleep, make sure it's a regular amount of sleep, not one night 7 hours and 10 the next for example. If you are feeling tired and falling asleep during the day you are probably not getting enough sleep. If this continues for more than 3 months you need to ask someone for advice.

Bedtime routine. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day if possible. Try not to lay in at the weekend for more than an hour (or 2 at the most). Try calming activities in the hour before bedtime, including reading, writing or listening to an audiobooks or podcasts.

Food and drink. Eat regularly throughout the day and have a healthy supper an hour before bed. Caffeine affects sleep drive so avoid tea, coffee, energy drinks after 4pm, and cut down during the day in general.

Mental health. If you are anxious or worried about things happening in your life, and this is affecting your sleep, talk to someone you trust to get help. It is common for worries to overwhelm you at bedtime and during the night. Try writing a diary earlier in the day to plan and to write down concerns. There are many meditation or breathing apps available you can try out during the day.

Waking in the night. If you wake during the night and can't get back to sleep then get out of bed, maybe even outside your bedroom and read or listen to a podcast until you feel sleepy enough to go back to bed. Apps like Calm, Headspace and Loona are helpful to relax. After about 30 minutes try to go back to sleep. Make sure that other people in your home know that you may be up and about.

Social media, video sharing channels and gaming. Content can be really alerting. Friends may be communicating with you until late into the night via social media, and this can affect your ability to fall asleep. If you are gaming later and later it can become difficult to stop, and your body can develop an advanced sleep phase. This can upset your ability to manage waking for school or college and consequently affect your physical and mental wellbeing. Try to work out ways to keep in touch or game with a different set of gamers at times to suit your sleep. Ask someone for help with this as it can be tough. Make sure that technology including phones are on charge elsewhere and use an ordinary alarm to wake for the day. Adults benefit from this too!



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Teen sleep: Why bother?

Sleep is important for mental and physical health.

Without it we would cease to exist. It's not possible to stay awake for long periods as the body takes over and forces us to sleep. Many road accidents are caused by drivers falling asleep. Even plants sleep and the most complex AI computers work better with periods of down time.

Sleep is important for learning too. If you are **studying** then try a sleep or study sandwich: get restful sleep the night before study, study during the day and then getting another night's sleep will help you better remember the facts and ideas you are trying to learn. Sleep is like the action a computer takes when you save something and then shut it down.

Lack of sleep also doesn't make you look your best or be your best.

The average amount of sleep required for positive health varies from person to person. **Teens need between 7 and 11 hours sleep on average** – everyone is different. If you are feeling tired with the amount of sleep you are getting now, you probably need to increase it.

A lack of sleep is linked to feelings of anxiety, low mood and self harm. Many young people with depression report a problem with sleep. Ask for help from someone else if your sleep is a problem for more than 3 months. Most sleep problems sort themselves out, most of the remainder can be successfully resolved too. There are apps like Sleepio for wakefulness, others like Calm, Headspace and Loona can help you relax.



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Schools and sleep: How you can help

If you are aware that a young person is sleepy during the school day or is unable to attend on time, consider the following:

Encourage the young person to complete a diary for 2 weeks. On average how much sleep are they getting each night? Is the young person getting an acceptable amount sleep based on average sleep ranges? This can be between 7 and 10 hours averaged over a fortnight.

Does the young person spend more than 30 minutes each night awake in bed? We all wake during the night, most of us don't notice this and settle back to sleep.

Is the wakefulness due to behaviour or lifestyle or could it have a medical cause? If you suspect a medical cause seek advice. Be aware that young people often experience a shift in their sleep pattern by two hours in teenage years. So a 7am start can feel like a 5am start for teens.

If the young person is using screens late into the night use some of the resources here to help give information. The light from screens can reduce the amount of sleep hormone melatonin produced by the body. Content can also make you more alert. Use a traditional alarm clock and place screens elsewhere.

Does the young person have set wake up times in order to develop a pattern? Having short sleep during the week and then a 'catch up' at the weekend is not helpful to develop sleep quality.

Does the young person spend too much time in bed, therefore waking is more likely? It is important to make sure that they keep the bedroom as a place for relaxation and sleep.

Any changes in sleep pattern, for example waking up earlier or going to bed earlier, can be made slowly, 15 minutes each time. If a young person is trying to tackle their sleep problem, an adapted timetable may be helpful initially as they try to change their sleep pattern.

Have opportunities during the school day for reflection. There are mindful techniques developed especially for schools. After lunch is a good time to choose. Time to address anxiety is helpful for sleep.

Make sure that knowledge about sleep is a priority across the school, including teaching staff. Hunrosa provides accredited Sleep Right training and wellbeing sessions. There are benefits for all in terms of mental and physical health and learning and performance.



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Sleep during change and difficult circumstances

When difficult things happen, it can be a natural reaction to experience broken sleep.

This may take the form of difficulties falling to sleep, staying asleep or early waking. If this lasts for longer than 3 months it is useful to ask for advice as something can often be done to help.

- Bedroom environment – is it restful and reserved for sleep.
- The hour before bed – take time to relax to prepare for sleep.
- Take time during the day to practice some relaxation like mindfulness, or paced breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. Even thinking about pleasant memories can help.
- Plan out tasks during the day.
- Try to complete difficult tasks in the daytime when you feel most alert but not before bed. So if this is keeping you awake you can be reassured that you have set aside time for this the next day.
- Make sure that you eat and exercise healthily.
- Get a dose of daylight when you wake and keep regular sleep patterns even on the weekend.



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Sleep for young adults

From 18 to 25 our need for sleep can be similar to that experienced in teenage years.

Although the need for sleep changes, anything between 6 and 11 hours when taken as an average across two weeks may be fine, when you don't feel sleepy during the day. Keep regular sleep patterns, not short sleep in the week and 'make up for it' at the weekend. Sleep doesn't work that way. Keep a sleep diary if you are concerned and note how you feel. You may get 6 hours over the two weeks and feel fine, some may get 8 hours and feel underslept. Everyone is different. If you are concerned check the following:

- **Bedroom environment** – is it restful and reserved for sleep and intimacy.
- The hour before bed – **take time to relax** to prepare for sleep.
- **Take time during the day** to relax and reflect there are apps to help like Calm and Headspace.
- **Anxiety** can be helped by planning out tasks during the day.
- Make sure that you don't have too much **caffeine** – it has the potential to affect you in the night from lunch time onward.
- **Drugs and alcohol** will affect sleep particularly later in the night.
- Use **daylight** to your advantage when you wake – about 30 minutes in the daylight helps. Keep regular sleep patterns and try to have no more than an hour lie in.
- As we know that daylight wakes us up, also the light from **screens** can reduce your sleep hormones. Also the content can make us more alert especially social media and video channels. Keep tech elsewhere and use an alarm clock other than a phone.



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Sleep for young adults (cont.)

- If you work **shifts** take care when travelling home from a night shift. Try to 'bank' sleep by going to bed earlier in the week before a night shift. Ideally aim for work where set shifts are possible and avoid split shifts.
- If you **wake during the night** on a regular basis, after approximately 15 minutes get out of bed and do something dull with no purpose. After 30 minutes return to bed, if you can't sleep still, wait for another 30 minutes and then try to sleep again. This will make sure that you associate your bed with sleep. If you are waking a lot your opportunity for sleep maybe too much. Try to fit your need for sleep with your opportunity. You can find out your sleep need by completing a sleep diary.
- Some people may have **medical conditions** affecting sleep. If you snore and gasp whilst asleep take medical advice as you may have sleep apnoea. Some people who are very restless at night may have a sleep movement disorder. These are treatable, if you think that this may be the case, consult your GP.
- Remember that as we go through life we are more likely to have difficult experiences which may affect sleep. Sometimes **talking therapies** can help. Most insomnia (a sleep problem lasting longer than 3 months) is treatable with techniques without medication. It is sometimes tempting to worry about sleep quantity and this can cause more sleeplessness. If you find that during the day you are thinking a lot about your lack of sleep in the night, seek advice.



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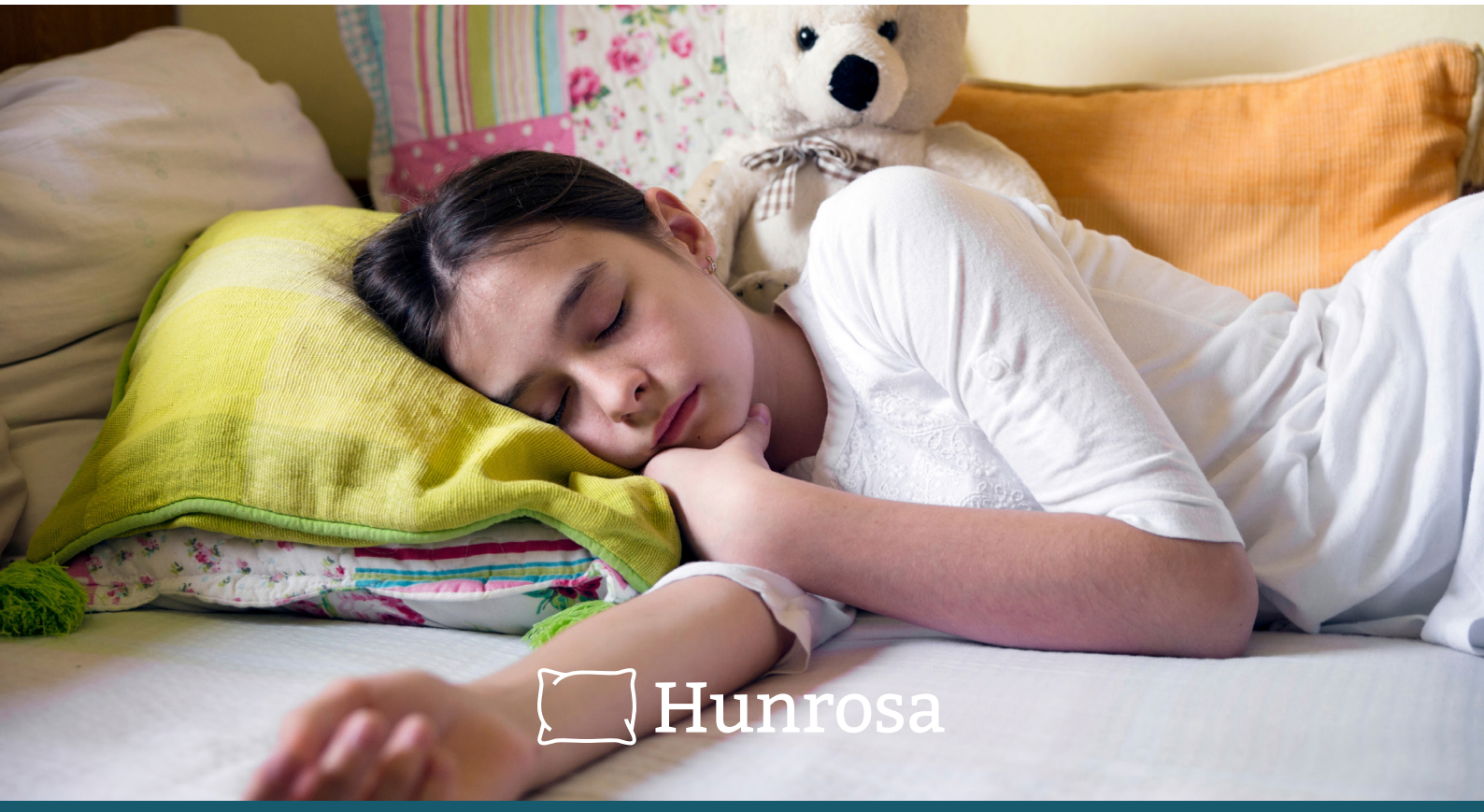
Sleep and additional needs

Research indicates that up to 86% of children with additional needs may have sleep problems.

Most children learn to sleep from prompts at bedtime, but for children with additional needs we need to accentuate these signals.

Make sure there are consistent cues for sleep and support positive bedtime associations.

- **Bedtime routine.** Repeat the same schedule every night so that your child understands what is expected of them and what is happening next. Start with a quiet hour before bedtime, where you can dim lights, play relaxing sounds and include a healthy snack for supper. Include a bath only if your child doesn't find it alerting. Move to the bathroom for teeth brushing and toilet and then into bed.
- **Morning.** Wake at the same time every morning to entrench a positive sleep cycle.
- **Average sleep needs.** Be realistic about how long your child is able to sleep. Some may need more than the average, but some need less. Plan your bedtime around the amount of sleep they can achieve.
- **Sleep association.** Use the bed for sleeping only, so that the association for bed and sleep is strengthened. Avoid using electronics in the bedroom and as a calming technique before sleep time. The light from electronics such as tablets or phones can reduce melatonin, and therefore disrupt your child sleep onset. Teach your child to fall asleep alone, but if you are concerned you can use a video monitor to check they are ok.



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Sleep and additional needs (cont.)

- **Visual support.** You can use PECs, Pictures or photos of the bedtime routine. Introduce using them in the day with daytime routines before bedtime to test if they help. You could also try 'now and next' cards. A sunrise/sunset clock is suitable for those children who can't tell time.
- **Sensory needs.** If your child has sensory processing challenges, then include calming activities within the bedtime routine. Before your quiet hour use exercises that provide resistance such as carrying weighted objects around, wheelbarrow games, trampolines or gentle swinging. Wrap up in a tight blanket, lap pads, smells such as lavender and vanilla may support to calm down. Your child may like a bean bag, fidget toys or to sit in sensory tent with dim lights and soft cushions.
- **Temperature.** Make sure the bedroom is cool but not cold. Hot temperatures affect sleep. Check that bedding and mattress covers are made of breathable material. Bamboo sheets are cooling and those with a high cotton content.
- **Pain.** Is your child able to tell your about any pain they may be experiencing?
- **Your child's diagnosis.** Bear in mind that some conditions could have an inherent sleep difficulties. However, even if your child has complex needs, there will be a behavioural element to their sleep disruption. See Sleep Strategies, Rewards and Early Morning Waking Cards.

