**Sleep Workshop Frequently Asked Questions**

**What is sleep?**

Sleep is a state of reduced awareness and responsiveness to the environment. Although your child may look as though they are inactive, there is a lot happening in their brain and body overnight!

**What are sleep cycles?**

There are several stages of sleep: Stage N1 (the lightest sleep) to Stage N3 (the deepest sleep, also known as “Slow Wave Sleep”), as well as Rapid Eye Movement (REM) Sleep. REM is our ‘dream’ sleep. We cycle through these stages many times throughout the night. It is normal to wake up several times in the night without realising it.

**My child takes a long time to fall asleep. How can I help them?**

The amount of time a child takes to go to sleep is called their sleep latency. When it starts getting dark, we produce a hormone called melatonin in our bodies which gives our brain the signal that it is time to sleep. Melatonin is affected by many things (such as light levels, amount of activity before bedtime, and anxiety – to name a few!). To give your child’s natural melatonin, the best chance of being effective, we recommend the following:

* Make sure that your child is getting some bright daylight first thing in the morning for at least 20 minutes (preferably by going outside). This helps to set their body clock (also known as their circadian rhythm)
* Some exercise that raises the heart rate in the afternoon can help to increase sleepiness at night.
* Avoid caffeinated and/or sugary drinks.
* Keep a regular calming bedtime routine involving non-screen-based activities (such as reading or puzzles) for at least an hour before bed. This is because the blue light from screens can affect melatonin production.
* Keep bedtimes and wake times at the same time (even on weekends)
* Keep the bedtime calming, cool, and non-stimulating. This may mean covering up toys and games at night-time.

**My child wakes fully several times overnight. Why is this?**

As explained above, it is normal to briefly wake several times a night. For some people, these brief wakings turn into full wakings, after which it is hard to get back to sleep again. The important question to ask is not “why is my child waking?”, but “why are they not falling back to sleep?” There are several factors that can influence this (biological, environmental, and behavioural). One key concept to understand is that of Sleep Associations.

**What is a Sleep Association?**

When your child is falling asleep at the beginning of the night, they will often have very specific environmental conditions (such as light level, noise level, temperature level, parental presence, particular toys). These are the conditions that your child’s brain associates with sleep (or their “Sleep Associations”). When your child comes to a natural point of waking overnight (which is normal), they will require the same conditions to fall back to sleep easily. If anything has changed since they first fell asleep (such as a light being turned off, a parent leaving the room, a change in temperature) then they are more likely to wake fully and find it harder to get back to sleep again. We recommend that whatever conditions are present at the start of the night are kept the same consistently throughout the night. It is possible to use the following sensory items as sleep associations to ensure a more consistent environment overnight:

* White noise: You may wish to trial white noise overnight. This can be played on a tape/CD player, or on an app overnight (if the device is high up on the shelf). It is important that this is played all night and turned off promptly on waking.
* Fans: Alternatively, it may be worth trying a fan in the bedroom. This provides both white noise and a cool bedroom overnight (the ideal sleeping temperature is 16-18 degrees C – much cooler than you might think!)
* Essential oils: Having a consistent smell that we associate with sleep can sometimes be helpful. For instance, some lavender or bergamot essential oil (placed on some cotton wool in a cup by the bedside and removed promptly in the morning).
* Lights: If your child needs a dim light in the bedroom overnight, we recommend trialling a red lightbulb (as the red spectrum of light does not interfere with melatonin).

**My child needs my presence to sleep/ wake up in the night and comes out of their bed. How can I help them to sleep in their own bed overnight?**

A popular method for helping your child learn to stay in their own bed is called Gradual Withdrawal, also known as the Disappearing Chair. This method is most used when you are co-sleeping with your child and want to change this. It involves slowly reducing your presence over time. An example of the approach:

* Start off sleeping with your child in the bed with you. If they wake overnight, pick a set phrase to settle them (such as “It is time for sleep”), and only use this phrase in any interaction with the child. This phrase can be said in a calm and kind tone, however, should not involve any conversation or further interaction with the child.
* You will need to wait until your child is settling well for at least 3 or 4 consecutively nights between each of the following steps.
* Step 1: Move yourself to the end of the bed as they are falling asleep. Use the same phrase to settle them. Stay with them for at least 20 minutes after they seem as though they have fallen asleep. Every time they wake in the night, you will need to go back to the same position at the end of the bed for them to fall asleep again.
* Step 2: Move to a chair by the bed. Repeat the rest of Step 1.
* Step 3: Move the chair a little away from the bed. Repeat the rest of Step 2.
* Step 4: Keeping moving the chair a little further away every 3 or 4 nights until you are out of the room.

**Rapid Return(Boring Parent Method):**

This method works best for children who go to sleep in their own bed but get up and leave several times overnight.

This method involves picking a set phrase.

* Step 1: Put your child to bed as you normally would. Then, stand outside their room.
* Step 2: As soon as your child is up, return them gently but immediately to their bed using the set phrase. If you are unable to hear them getting out of bed, you can use wind-chimes by their door to alert you to them leaving their room.
* You may have to repeat this many, many times at first until your child is asleep.
* However, the frequency of this should reduce day by day if you keep going. For both sleep techniques described, remaining as consistent as possible is very important. Abandoning a technique halfway through can make things worse in the long run. So, make sure you have a very clear picture in your mind of how you are going to respond overnight. Make sure you pick a time where you can commit to this, and when there will be as few distractions as possible. Lean on friends and family for support as this is very hard work!

**My child is very worried or anxious at night/about going to bed, and this seems to be affecting their sleep. How can I help them with this?**

Many children go through periods of worry about the bedtime, as this can involve separating from a parent and learning a new skill (a little like going to school for the first time). There are a few things that you can try to help with your child’s bedtime anxiety or worry.

* Start by acknowledging your child’s feelings and letting them know that their feelings are very normal. You can tell them about your own experiences of sleeping on your own for the first time (if you can remember these!), making sure to mention how it gets easier the more you practice.
* Make a dedicated time and space to talk about the worries in the daytime, and not as part of the bedtime routine. Talking through difficult feelings too close to bedtime can raise anxieties, which can stop your child from feeling sleepy.
* Help your child to express how they are feeling by using coloured pens and paper to draw out bedtime worries (again, preferably in the afternoon/evening and not as part of the bedtime routine). This can open conversations about specific worries that you might be able to resolve together.
* If you find that your children are wanting to talk through their worries at bedtime, it may be helpful to note these on a piece of paper together and put them in a box. Alternatively, you can give them to a Worry Monster or Teddy Bear to look after overnight. Then find a time the next day to look at the worries together. It is very important that the worries are talked through together with a suitable adult so that they are not ignored, and this is often easier in the daylight.
* Carry out some body based relaxation exercises to try and calm the body down before bed. One example of a fun exercise is “Bumble Bee Breathing”. Sit together with your child and take a deep breath in. See if you can notice how the air feels in your nose. Then as you breathe out through your mouth, say Buzzzzzzz quietly for as long as you can. Repeat 6 times, with different sounds (such as hmmmmmm, or ahhhhhhh). Many other brief breathing exercises are available online.

**On average how much sleep should a child have?**

Infants (aged 4-12 months) 12-16 hours sleep

Children (aged 1-2 years) 11-14 hours sleep

Children (aged 3-5 years )10-13 hours sleep

Children (aged 6-12 years) 9-12 hours sleep

Teenagers (aged 13-18 years) 8-10 hours sleep

**I have heard the term ‘sleep hygiene’ what does this refer to?**

This refers to the lead-up to and routine around your child’s bedtime.

**What drinks should my child avoid drinking before bed?**

Caffeine should be avoided and is present in drinks such as: tea, coffee, fizzy drinks e.g. cola, energy drinks, hot chocolate.

**My child never seems tired when he has spent the day just playing on his computer?**

Encourage your child when possible, to undertake some kind of active sports, taking a walk, playing outside as this can help burn off energy and promote tiredness.

**At bedtime my child wants to just play with their toys in their bedroom.**

If toys are not able to be removed from the bedroom cover the toys with a blanket and say that they are going to bed as well.

**Why is it not advised to let children watch Television or play on their technology before bed?**

Using technology before bedtime can prevent your child settling to sleep. This is because they produce light that is good at suppressing the natural hormone produced in their brain (melatonin) that causes sleepiness.

**My child routinely wakes in the night and comes into our bed.**

It is important that your child on awaking learns to self-settle rather than joining you in your bed. Continue to encourage them to self-settle by leading them quietly back (no talking) to their own bed.

**What are the effects on my child if they do not get adequate sleep?**

Good quantity and quality sleep helps your child concentrate, remember things that they have learnt that day, to manage their emotions and to display positive behaviours.

*Remember, sleep is affected by so many factors, there are no quick fixes.*