

Sleep

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I heard a mother say that she'd pay a hundred pounds for a sound night's sleep, and as she said it, I thought wryly, "I've walked in your shoes..." Why is sleep, or the lack of it, a major topic of parents' conversation? Because it is absolutely on the very pinnacle of any parent's wish list, and because lack of it makes life unutterably impossible, including for the kids who don't sleep!

It used to really get my goat. People asking me, "Is she going through the night yet?" as I cradled my five week old daughter. No, of course she isn't...and neither is she meant to! But she did some months later. I meet parents every week in clinic who tell me that they are still waiting for that magic moment – when they realise that the alarm clock has gone off...and they haven't been up often multiple times in the night for a cuddle, yet more milk, lying next to their child wearily, patting a child till they fall asleep again, dummy in...out...in... and amazingly, both parents are still together in bed, rather than one banished to the spare room whilst their child takes their place.

Firstly, it's important to focus down on what the problem actually is, as that reveals the approach to take. Is it about refusing to go to bed? Finding it hard to get to sleep? Is it waking up once or many times in the middle of the night? Waking up early? Or, horrors! All of them...

Sleep and behaviour are intimately linked. "Tired and wired" is the phrase used to describe a child who is as high as a kite, bad tempered and oppositional, all because of lack of sleep. Kids are not like you and I, who slowly struggle through the day after a poor night. The typical early morning reluctance to wake up, get dressed etc can be quickly replaced by relentless over activity and appalling concentration which are the last things the child and the teacher need. These features can be so severe that the child can be mislabelled as having ADHD.

All of us know that a good bedtime routine, where similar things happen at similar times, be it 7pm, 8pm, 9pm, is at the heart of a

child falling asleep and staying asleep. But, did you know that the natural brain sleep hormones that tell our busy heads "Now it's time to feel sleepy" are switched on by a whole host of things including specific bed times and darkness? So, that innocent night-light on by your child's bed, or an hour's Playstation, or a teenager sitting captivated on Facebook just before bedtime will actively switch off those precious sleep hormones that you want to cultivate. Banning 'electronic devices' during the hour before bed is the first step towards a child who falls asleep at the time you want them to.

Also, repeatedly using the same set phrase e.g. "Night, night, sleep tight..." acts as a sort of hypnosis so that each time you say the same phrase, your child increasingly associates it with feeling sleepy. A bit like Pavlov's dogs...

Behavioural approaches to childhood sleep problems are by far the best at promoting good sleep habits. Much of it is around what we call 'sleep hygiene' i.e. setting the mood for sleep. So, here are some golden tips that are recognised internationally as crucial for establishing a reliable sleep pattern in children.

- Avoid naps unless your child is preschool, as this disrupts 'sleep architecture'.
- Set fixed settling and waking times, using a clock or other visual cue where possible, and stick to them. Kids' brains like routine.
- Ban electronic devices an hour before bed.
- Ensure that the bedroom is dark and quiet, as these are well known brain cues to help a child fall asleep.
- Create a calm wind-down period before bed (and contrary to what many believe, TV is extremely stimulating for a child!)
- Leave enough time for the usual dawdling period. Kids love to make tooth-brushing last 20 minutes. Anything to put off going to bed...
- Warm baths and milky drinks before bed increase central body temperature and help settle the brain.
- Make the bedroom safe, secure and non-stimulating
- Make sure that your child's bed and bedding are comfortable

- Settling a child needs to be matter-of-fact, loving and brief. Use your set good night phrase.
- Then, exit the room as soon as possible, allowing your child to learn to fall asleep on their own without patting, rocking, stroking etc, all of which set habits in children which are extremely hard to break.
- Then ignore them unless for good cause such as true nightmares or ill-health i.e. avoid rewards for bad behaviour such as milk or cuddles.
- Don't be surprised if things worsen temporarily as you start to re-gain control. They will settle, I promise you! This is known by sleep experts as the 'extinction burst' and is due to a child trying to make you change back to bad old habits!

In the next editorial, I'll focus on what makes a child avoid going to bed, struggle to relax and sleep, and wake in the night. Also, what you as parents may be doing to unwittingly cause sleep difficulties, and what you can do to re-gain control and a great night's sleep.