

Sensory Sleep Strategies

Introduction

It is important to prepare our bodies in preparation for going to sleep. Our body and mind needs to be calm and relaxed before we can sleep. This can feel very hard for people who have sensory processing difficulties e.g. if you or your child are very active and 'on the go' during the day it can feel very difficult to become calm and still, ready for sleep. What we do in the daytime will affect our night time. Some people struggle with the change from hearing lots of sounds and noises during the day to coping with a quiet environment at night. Others may struggle to gain a sense of their body position when it is dark; it may feel as though their body has 'disappeared' when the lights go off because they can no longer rely on their vision or movement to sense their body position. Knowing what your body needs during the day can help in planning the best sleep strategies for you and your child.



Preparing our bodies for sleep

There are lots of ways that we can prepare our bodies ready for sleep. We need to start the process of helping our bodies move from being active to calm, a few hours before bedtime. If you are an active person it is important that your need for activity has been met during the day and that physical activity is complete a few hours before your bedtime. Here are some general tips for getting a good night's sleep:

- Complete physical activity 2-3 hours before bed-time - move towards calm/quiet play before bedtime.
- Finish screen time at least 1 hour before sleep
- Have an evening meal at least 2 hours before bed-time.
- A snack and warm drink (no caffeine, limited sugar) an hour before bed may help e.g. a banana or bowl of cereal and a mug of warm milk or drinking yoghurt through a straw.
- Have a regular bed-time which should allow for approximately 9-11 hours sleep (6-13 years old) or 8-10 hours (14-25 years old). If you are in a habit of going to bed very late then start to gradually go to bed 15 minutes earlier each night until you reach your ideal bed-time.
- Have a regular wind-down routine that is familiar and works for you– see ideas below



Wind-down Ideas

We can send messages to our body and brain that it is time to slow down, ready for sleep. Only choose the activities which will help you relax. Ideas include:

- Having a therapy ball massage – rolling therapy ball from lower legs upwards towards upper body whilst always checking that the pressure feels comfortable.
- Using a foot spa
- Hand/foot massage
- Firmly brushing down arms to fingertips with soft scrub brush
- Gentle rocking over therapy ball or in a 'leaf'/rocker chair
- Close curtains in your house
- Sleep cues- clock, closing curtains
- Low lights a couple of hours before sleeping
- Talk in a calm, low voice.
- Warm bath with favourite products. Towel dry with your favourite towel- may be soft and fluffy or scratchy.
- Change into comfortable night clothes about an hour before bed– these should feel comfortable against the skin and allow us to feel at just the right body temperature – not too hot and not too cold.
- Reading a book – think about a story that is calming and enjoyable and the best place/position for this activity e.g. lying on your tummy, sitting in a rocker chair, cuddled up next to a family member. You may prefer someone to read to you or an audio book.
- A snack and warm drink (no caffeine, limited sugar) an hour before bed may help e.g. a banana or toast and a mug of warm milk
- Favourite toy/snuggle blanket



Bed Area

It is important that the room and bed you are sleeping in feels comfortable, safe and helps relax you. These are some areas to consider:

- Temperature in the room – A cool temperature is recommended. it is important that the bedroom does not feel too hot or cold.
- Lighting – if you feel uncomfortable sleeping in the dark, consider a night light or leaving a corridor light on. If the dark helps you sleep, consider blackout blinds or dark curtains.
- Noise – white noise (e.g. sound of hairdryer, fan or ticking clock) in the background can help some people settle to sleep.
- Bed position – Some people prefer to sleep next to a wall, right up against the headboard or next to a parent/carer so that they can feel their body position and feel safe. Try placing a long firm pillow or teddy next to them.
- Remove devices (ipads, phones) from the sleeping area. The blue light interferes with our ability to sleep.
- Bed sheets: these should feel comfortable against the skin – some people prefer cotton – which can feel cooler, others like soft brushed cotton, which feels warmer. Some people like a top sheet loosely covering their bodies, some like the sheets tucked in tightly and others prefer not to have a top sheet. For children who like moving, fidgeting and knowing where their bodies are stretchy lycra sheets can feel snug and secure.
- Duvet, blankets, sleeping bag: consider the best option for you/your child. Consider if they feel comfortable with weight on them and how much. Some prefer the tightness of a sleeping bag. Consider using several thin blankets – particularly for those who enjoy weight and warmth or having one thicker blanket. Soft fleece blankets can be comforting. Weighted blankets must always be supervised and not left covering your child whilst they sleep. If used they must follow guidelines of being up to 10% of your child's weight and are used for 30-45 minutes whilst settling to sleep and supervised.

