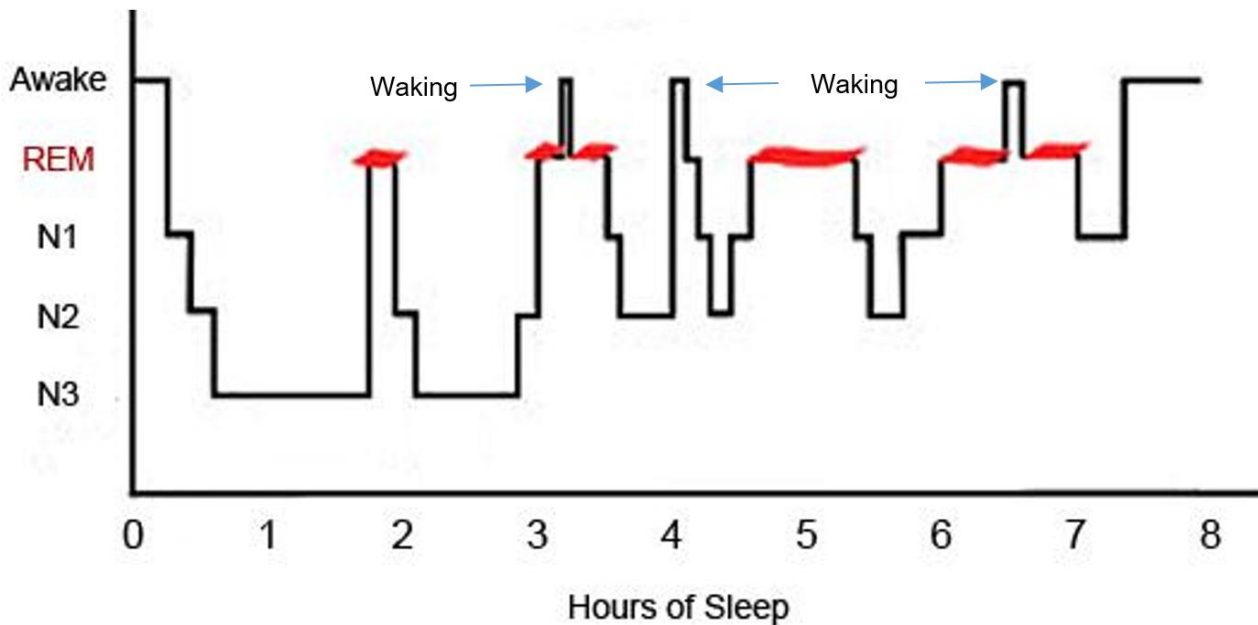


Sleep Basics

This leaflet outlines what sleep is, what a 'typical' night's sleep looks like, and some key ideas for helping your child's sleep



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 actually a lot happening in their brain and body overnight!

What are sleep cycles?

The above diagram is called a "Hypnogram", and shows you what a typical night of sleep should look like. 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, and is indicated in **red** on the diagram above.

- **Stage N3 (also called "Slow Wave Sleep")** is important for physical healing, hormone regulation, and growth. This is our deepest sleep, and happens mostly in the first third of the night.
- **REM** sleep is important for memory, learning and emotional regulation. This gets more common towards the last two thirds of the night.

We cycle through these stages many times in one night, going from light sleep to deep sleep and back again.

Most importantly, it is very normal to wake several times a night. We will often fall back to sleep again without remembering that we have woken.

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!). In order 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 the 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 wake briefly 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 a number of 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 else on an app overnight (as long as 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/ wakes up in the night and comes out of their bed. How can I help them to sleep in their own bed overnight?

The two most popular methods for helping your child learn to stay in their own bed are called **Camping Out (also known as Gradual Retreat) and Rapid Return**. Both of these should work best in combination with the tips above.

Camping Out/ Gradual Retreat: This method is most commonly used when you are co-sleeping with your child and want to change this. It involves slowly reducing your presence over a period of time. An example camping out programme may involve the following steps:

- 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: This method works best for children who go to sleep in their own bed, but get up and leave several times overnight. It may be that you start on the Camping Out method and switch to this once you are at the door.

- This method involves picking a set phrase (as above).
- 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 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 period of 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 up 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 look at the worries together. It is very important that the worries 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 Buzzzzzzzz 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.

All of the advice given above works best in combination. Unfortunately as sleep is affected by so many factors, there are no quick fixes. Good luck!