

Information about Sleep

For Parents / Carers of

Children who have a Disability

(under 5 years old)

 

Sleep problems are extremely common in children who have a disability (and those who do not have a disability).

For parents / carers / families, this often causes tremendous anxiety, frustration and uncertainty.

Children need to learn good sleep habits, ideally from an early age. This can be more difficult when a child has a disability for a number of reasons, for example:

* Hospitalisation.
* Illness.
* Needing intervention, such as feeds, medication and oxygen.
* Parental anxiety about the child’s needs.

All children can benefit from experiencing some measures you can take to promote better sleep (see below).

**Important steps to take to promote better sleep:**

**Step 1** The child needs an understanding of the difference between daytime and night-time. You can promote this by ensuring that noise, activity levels, toys in the bedroom and light are reduced at bedtime.

**Step 2** The child needs to be informed that bedtime is approaching. You can promote by having a pre-bedtime routine that you follow every night. For example, bath (optional), drink, quiet time, story and bed.

**Step 3** The child needs to learn to fall asleep alone in the place they will sleep throughout the night, for example, avoid allowing them to fall asleep on the settee and then be carried to bed. You can promote this by putting your child in bed / cot drowsy, but awake. Avoid rocking and cuddling to sleep or giving a bottle to fall asleep on. Do not allow the child to fall asleep watching TV or a DVD.

**Step 4** The child needs to know what is expected of them at bedtime. You can promote this by setting clear and consistent boundaries at bedtime i.e., bedtime means bedtime - no chatting, playing, eating and drinking or leaving the bedroom.

**Step 5** Think about daytime sleep; avoid daytime sleeping after 3 pm, as this encroaches on the night-time sleep. As your child is able to cope, try to phase out daytime sleeping.

**Step 6** If the child wakes during the night, they need to learn to be able to fall back to sleep by themselves. You can promote this by:

* Ensuring that they remain in the bedroom.
* Going to them and quietly reassuring them that you are there, but it is time to sleep.
* Not rocking or cuddling them back to sleep.
* Not engaging in conversation, play, eye contact or smiling; keep facial expressions neutral.
* A child over 12 months old, who is eating and drinking adequately throughout the day, should not be given a drink during the night. You can discourage this by gradually reducing the volume given and substituting the usual drink with water. Eventually, they should lose the incentive to wake just for a drink of water.

**Other things to take in consideration:**

* **Communication**

If your child regularly uses aids to communicate, such as

objects of reference, signs and symbols or visual timetables,

ensure that these are used to support any measures you

implement around sleep.

Children who have complex communication difficulties, or

learning disabilities may benefit additional resources, such as

social stories, visual aids and signs and symbols.

We hope you find the information in this leaflet useful, if

you require further help and support contact your local health visiting team.