

SLEEP HYGIENE: A PARENT'S GUIDE

For growing children, sleep is critical to both physical and mental health outcomes. According to the Australian Medical Association, anywhere between 10 and 13 hours is considered a healthy amount for a preschooler to sleep; for the 6-13 age bracket, that figure drops only slightly (9 to 11 hours).



However, quality of sleep is every bit as important as quantity. Since the body needs periods of deep sleep and REM to recharge properly, children who experience fitful sleep can often become tired or stressed - even when sleeping for the recommended amount of time.



A daily routine and bedroom environment that are conducive to healthy sleeping patterns can help correct this - what's now commonly known as a sense of "sleep hygiene". With that in mind, here's our top tips for promoting sleep hygiene amongst children:



Stick to a routine

Since the body naturally adapts to daily cycles, setting firm bed and wake times can be immensely beneficial for children's sleep. If possible, try to stick to these patterns even on the weekend - though this is, of course, easier said than done.

Minimise screen time

Children - and adults, for that matter - should avoid screen time before bed. This includes TVs, laptops, smartphones and all monitors. Artificial light, it turns out, has the potential to alter the body's biological clock and suppress the natural production of melatonin, which in turn are critical to the normal sleep-wake cycle.



Ideally, keep smartphones and all other devices out of the bedroom completely. While this is easier said than done, it helps to keep the bed for bedtime only. Over time, the brain begins to associate it as such, and begins to unwind as soon as you lie down.



Limit caffeine/sugar

Though younger children shouldn't be consuming much (if any) high-caffeine products to begin with, caffeine (and sugar) is also found in products like soda and chocolate. Due to their stimulant effect, even if they don't prevent sleep entirely caffeinated products can directly cause shallow or poorer-quality sleep. Chamomile tea or a glass of hot milk can serve as an excellent substitute.

Don't skip the bedtime wind-down

Associating certain activities with sleep can be an excellent way to set up a bedtime routine. Reading a story from a book can be an excellent way to help children unwind at the end of a long day, as can singing a lullaby, listening to soft, calming music, or enjoying a warm bath.

Regular exercise

Exercise is all-important for a good night's rest, particularly for growing and energetic teens. High-intensity cardiovascular exercise is the best to encourage - though remember that exercise in the late afternoon and night can impede sleep.

Tossing and turning? Take a break

If you find that your child is complaining about being unable to fall asleep in the middle of the night, insisting they stay in bed rarely works. Instead, have them take a short break of 20 to 30 minutes. Encouraging them to do something the child normally finds boring - such as reading a textbook - can help them to drift off more naturally.

Give children a security object

A security object - such as a stuffed toy or a soft blanket - can help give younger children the sense of reassurance they need to fall asleep. It can be particularly useful where the parent or parents aren't there, and can help to shape a sense of bedtime routine more broadly.

Turn the alarm clock away

For anxious children or those suffering with clinical sleep issues, clock-watching causes much more harm than good. If you know your child struggles with these issues, it may be a good idea to turn the clock face away from their bed - and, by doing so, you'll help reduce stress around sleepless nights.