



Creating a sensory routine for sleep

For a child with sensory processing difficulties, sleep can be a tough one to master. Firstly, the world is too bright, too loud, too stimulating, or worse, not stimulating enough. Secondly, the neurological processes that work between body and brain are disrupted, so the neurological behaviours that create sleep may be disordered and not functioning well.

What we need to do to help a child sleep is create a **consistent routine**. Here is the hard bit: a bed time routine will take around two hours. Please don't stop reading! Much of this routine you're likely to be already doing.

By two hours, we mean start thinking about how the body is stimulated. What food is your child eating or not eating? What stimuli are they engaging with and not engaging with?

Recommendations to support your child's sleep routine:

1. **SLEEP INDUCING FOODS and COMFY TUMMY:**

e.g. warm milk and honey, banana, a small bowl of oats/oatmeal with milk and honey, natural yoghurt (no added sugar or fruit sugars), whole grain foods, chick peas. These foods contain natural sleep inducing chemicals.

Ensure your child is not hungry before bed but also hasn't eaten too much to be able to sleep.



2. **AVOID SUGAR AND ADDITIVES** – Sugary foods and drinks and additives stimulate our brain and nervous systems and make children over-excited and unable to sleep. – Always check the ingredients on the label. There are often hidden sugars!



3. **THEY WILL NEED SENSORY INPUT** before sleeping

4. **MOVEMENT/ WORK OUT** –Two hours before bed try and fit in a big heavy-work out. This is proprioception- (input into the joints and muscle receptors) lifting, pushing, putting weight you're your joints, pulling and stretching.

5. **LINEAR/VESTIBULAR INPUT** – gentle rocking movement 1 hour before bed.

6. **CALM ENVIRONMENT AND CALM STATE** in the build up to bed time. – calming bath time, dimming lights, night lights, reducing noise in the house, talking calmly. Maybe your child will need a blackout blind.

7. **DEEP PRESSURE/TACTILE INPUT** – 15 - 30 minutes before bed time

8. **STOP SCREEN TIME AT LEAST AN HOUR BEFORE BED**

SUGGESTIONS FOR A SLEEP ROUTINE SCHEDULE:

Two hours before bed:

- **Big work out-** A tired body and a sensory organised system will get to sleep better.
- **Reduce stimuli-** Start to turn down lights and reduce environmental noise.
- **Start to reduce fluids-** Needing a wee or bed wetting is a very common sleep interruption.
- **A nice tummy calming snack or meal with sleep inducing foods (no sugar)**
- **Reduce sugars and additives you know can lead to hyper reactivity.**
- **Make the home/bedroom organised.**
- **Provide your child with lots of attention and positive reinforcement-** We want to fill up a child's need for attention in the build-up so they feel more content to leave us and sleep.

An hour and half before bed:

- **Bath time/blowing bubbles in the bath** - Warm water helps to calm the nervous system. When drying with a towel use this an opportunity to provide deep pressure into arms and legs.
- **Change for bed, brush teeth**– Changing clothes can be stimulating. Get this out of the way and afford time together for play after they are changed. That way you may avoid arguments and give a child time to adjust to bed time clothing.
- **Introduce cuing sounds-** Bed time story tape or programme, gentle/ familiar music, nature sounds
- **Tidy up** – pack away any toys so the bedroom is clear of distractions
- **A low stimuli environment** should be nearly achieved.

An hour before bed:

- **Calm joint activity-** Giving attention now may reduce the need for it later.
- **Gentle linear movement activities** – e.g. rocking gently back and forth on tummy on the gym ball. Put weight through hands.
- **Massage**, provide gentle and firm foot squeezes, slow rhythmic squeezes on shoulders and arms, legs and feet. Or gentle squashes with the gym ball.
- **Use calm quiet structured commands and communication, visuals, reduce language**
- **Vibrating mat/toy, Electric toothbrush**
- **Blowing bubbles or stretching with breath work**

Half an hour before bed:

- **Big bed time routine starts here!** – Turn off/down other household noises
- **Make way to sleep space**
- **Use structured and familiar commands, visual for 'bedtime'** – minimal language
- **Lights down / Sensory night lights / Close blackout blind**
- **Deep pressure:** Cuddle, blanket wrap. You could give more gentle deep pressure into arms, legs, feet
- **Night time calming song or story – this is a cue for sleep time**
- **Set up night time stimuli** -sound, visual, tactile-weighted items, blanket squeezes

Bed time

- Try to calm yourself, focus on your breath for 5 breaths, slow your own breathing, this can encourage a child to breath more slowly. Our state of regulation can help a child to feel calmer.
- The only stimuli in the environment should be sensory regulating/calming.
- Draw attention to calming sensory stimuli.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES:

MOVEMENT/ WORK OUT - Two hours before bed

Try and fit in a big heavy-work work out. This provides proprioceptive input - (input into the joints and muscle receptors) lifting, pushing, putting weight you're your joints, pulling and stretching.

This can be tricky if you live in a small flat or house. Try and think about what you could do with your child to get their body moving and using their muscles.

Here are some suggestions: Choose 1 or 2



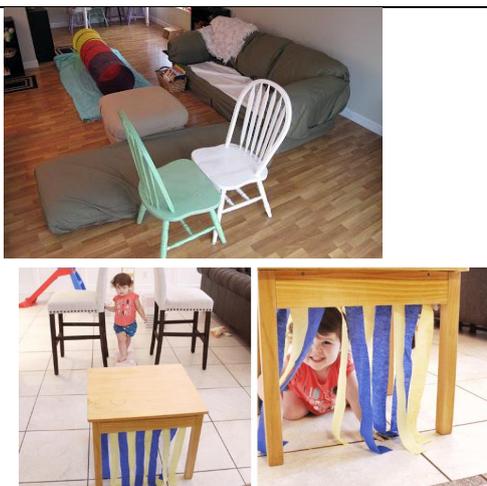
Gym ball (55cm)

- 1) Support your child at their hips to sit on the ball, feet flat in front. Encourage them to bounce and count and then stop. Encourage them to ask/sign for more or finished.
- 2) Support your child to lie with tummy on a therapy ball. Support them at their hips to ensure they don't fall.
- 3) Encourage them to walk hands forwards and balance with weight through their hands. You could get them to throw bean bags/soft toys into a bucket
- 4) Encourage them to put weight through hands and walk hands forwards and backwards. Support them gently rock back and forth. You could hum a gentle tune.



Tug of war: Use a rolled up sheet or towel or a piece of stretchy theraband. Play tug of war with your child. Please ensure that the resistance is held for at least 5-10 seconds each time. Ensure there is enough space to avoid injury.

- Alternatively incorporate in to "row row row your boat" song.



Obstacle Courses/Circuits:

- **You can do indoors or outdoors**
- Set up 2-3 activities in a sequence to start with and build up slowly. Demonstrate the sequence to help your child understand and copy. Repeat the circuit.
- Set up activities that include: over, under, through, between, along, around, forward, back, in and out (of boxes/tunnels) throwing at targets, pulling self along on scooter board, stepping stones with cushions, jumping, hopping, rolling.
- You could mark out the circuit with tape

	<p>Structured 'jumping' and 'crashing' if you have space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow jumping on the bed or onto a crash mat, or a mattress or onto a big pile of cushions • Count e.g. up to 20 then get them to jump into a big pile of cushions (ensure they are safe and there are no hard object) • Use a timer to give an end to countdown at the end of the activity. Always supervise.
	<p>Are their stairs in the building that you could safely run up and down with your child 10 times. This can be a good work out.</p>
	<p>Sleep inducing snack such as banana, warm milk and honey, small bowl of whole grain oats and milk.</p> <p>Sucking a drink through a straw.</p> <p>Avoid sugar and additives.</p>

BATH TIME – One and a half hours before bed

	<p>Bath time:</p> <p>This can be a cue for the bedtime routine. Bathing in warm water calms the nervous system ready for sleep.</p> <p>Be with your child, dim the lights already if you can. Blowing bubbles can be fun and your child may engage with this.</p> <p>Drying with towel - Use this as an opportunity to give them sensory input through gentle rubbing to dry their body and then squeezing/deep pressure through arms and legs.</p>
	<p>Put on pyjamas and brush teeth in the bathroom.</p> <p>Changing clothes can be stimulating. Get this out of the way and afford time together for play after they are changed.</p>

LINEAR MOVEMENT– One hour before bed

This refers to gentle rocking or swinging but in a backward and forward or side to side motion. This can provide movement input that a child may be seeking and that is calming.

***Avoid** – being upside down, spinning, falling games, crashing games. These can be alerting to the system

Here are some suggestions:



Gym ball (55cm)

- 5) Support your child to lie with tummy on a therapy ball. Support them at their hips to ensure they don't fall.
- 6) Support them gently rock back and forth. You could hum a gentle tune.

Or

In a bean bag - squishing and rocking side to side



Sensory Light Toys and tactile input - it may help to give some sensory input before bedtime.

This may stimulate more so monitor the effects.

RHYTHMIC DEEP PRESSURE INPUT – 30 minutes to one hour before bed

Providing deep touch pressure calms the nervous system. Making this slow, calm and rhythmic calms the nervous system even further.



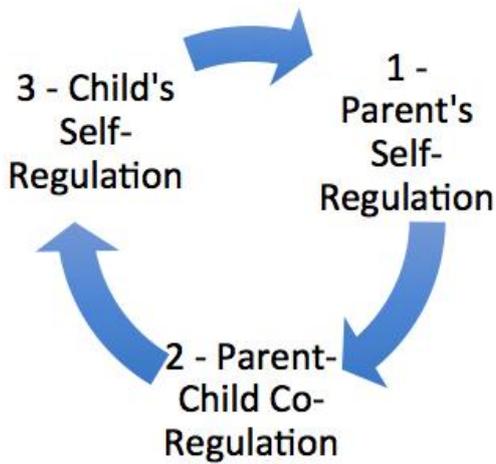
Deep Pressure: Lying on tummy and adult rolls a gym ball (or a use a large pillow) over the back of their body. Provide this rhythmically and slowly. Eg: squishing down slowly and softly counting 1,2,3 then moving slowly down from the top of the back and down the legs. Avoid the neck and head area.

- You can use a large bean-bag or a pillow if you don't have a gym ball.



Body massage: Hugs, squeezes, massage on arms, shoulders, legs. See what your child likes and responds to.

Foot massage - This can be really calming. Ensure you breathe slowly and deeply as you provide slow, firm and rhythmic pressure (not too much pressure).



Co-regulation

When we are calm, this helps others feel calm.

We can learn to regulate and calm ourselves and one method is through 'coherent breathing' techniques. Bringing our awareness to our breath, slowing down our breathing (not forcing the breath). Breathing in and out through our nose. Making both inhale and exhale at least the same length. The longer the exhale, the more this calms our nervous system. Counting calmly to ourselves can help. e.g.

Inhale - 1, 2, 3.. pause,

Exhale, 1, 2, 3, (4, 5) pause, repeat.

Practice on your own and see how you feel.

When you are with your child try and remind yourself to be aware of your breathing and to return to this way of breathing.

BED TIME



Set up the environment

A bedroom should be a sleep-room only. As this is not always possible, make turning their room into a sleep space part of their routine by packing toys away and getting their sleep kit out.

- Tidy room - a busy room can be confusing and too stimulating.
- Reduce noise in the house - turn off t.v., radio etc
- Curtains closed, Soft lighting/night light, Blackout blind.
- Calming sounds or music, bedtime story - maybe in bed or in cosy corner
- Adult supporting to breathe deeply and calmly



In bed

Maybe your child would benefit from more deep pressure at this point when they wrapped up in their duvet.

Tucking covers in tightly and provide some nice deep pressure. Hugs, squeezes, massage on arms, shoulders, legs. Foot massage.

See what your child likes and responds to.

*Ensure you are breathing slowly, calmly and deeply as you provide slow, firm and rhythmic pressure (not too much pressure).

Other Tips:

Sound

We can't sound proof a child's world, but we can provide calming and regulating sounds. This will be different for every child. This refers to monotonous and repetitive low frequency sounds such as waves, whale songs, heart beats. For some children classical music or familiar children's songs can work, but you do not want anything that attracts attention. You want sounds that are so consistent they dull attention to sound.

Light and visual stimuli

- Use cueing lights – soft lighting as bedtime cue
- Turn off /avoid strip lighting before bed - striplights flicker and are stimulating.
- Try not to use light in the hall as a night light. Use a specific night light inside the room that is consistent.
- Turn lights down and shut all the curtains.
- Turn off blue screens. Keep tablets and mobile phones on no light functions, and if possible, out of a child's room.
- **Black out blinds** - You may find that your child needs all light removed from the room. Portable black out blinds are great for this. (e.g. *The Gro Company Stars and Moons Gro Anywhere Portable Blackout Blind with suction cups, available from Amazon*)



A small light projection display can be beneficial. You can get high tech ones that turn on with movement, and you can also get ones that turn off after a period of time. If you feel you need an all-night one for your frequently waking child, make sure it is good quality and will not overheat. Again, the imagery should be enough to engage a child's attention but not so busy it entertains them and keeps them awake. E.g. A repetitive motion rather than a static image.



Lay in your child's bed and see what they have to look at. A blank visual line will encourage them to look for stimulus elsewhere, but a busy visual line will over stimulate. You may want to have a few different light shows or filters as these will keep a child's initial interest

Calming

- **Deep and slow breathing** will trigger sleep. Slowing your own breathing, breathing through your nose, can naturally change your child's breathing pattern.
- Use a **calm, gentle, quiet voice** and limit language
- **Familiarity helps.** Using familiar songs, stories and routines will help a child calm and regulate.
- **Blowing and sucking-** blow bubbles in the bath with straws or tubing, drink a night time drink with a straw, play with bubbles in evening work out
- **Deep pressure - Massage,** brushing, foot massage.
- **Vibrating toys can calm.** You can get vibrating mats for beds or for near beds.
- Use monitors to avoid 'waking' a child when checking on them.
- Sensory deprivation is not always beneficial. This means complete darkness, silence and no movement can make it harder to sleep for a child with sensory processing difficulties. They may need just the right input.
- Repetitive stimuli

Alerting (hyper-active) – Lead to difficulty sleeping

- TV and blue screen-see attached appendix.
- Spinning, going upside down
- Tickling
- Being upset (not always crying)
- Certain foods
- Light touch
- Stress and worry

PLEASE REMEMBER

A successful bedtime routine will vary in each home. Don't feel you have to follow all these suggestions. This handout is provided to give you ideas for developing a calming bedtime routine.

This will be a trial and error process!