

SUPPORTING BETTER SLEEP FOR CHILDREN WITH SEND

GENTLE, PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Sleep can be especially tricky for children with additional needs. Whether it's sensory sensitivities, anxiety or changes in routine, many **SEND children** need extra support to settle and sleep well. Here are some helpful ideas to try at home:

Start with a Predictable Routine

Children with SEND often feel more secure with structure.

- **Use a visual schedule or picture cards** to show the bedtime steps
- **Include calming activities** like a warm bath, massage or quiet play unless these cause upset or dysregulation
- End with a **familiar story or song**
- **Stick to the same bedtime and wake-up time** every day – even weekends

Create a Calming Sleep Environment

The bedroom should feel safe and soothing.

- Keep the room **cool, quiet and dimly lit**
- **Use white noise or soft music** if silence is unsettling
- Let your child **choose comforting items** like a favourite blanket or toy
- **Remove distractions** like clutter, bright lights or noisy electronics





Support Sensory Needs

Some children are more sensitive to touch, sound or light.

- **Use calming scents** if your child enjoys smells
- Offer a gentle hand or foot massage to **help them relax** or a deep tissue massage if they need some proprioceptive input to **help them feel more secure**
- **Try weighted blankets or compression sheets** (if safe and appropriate)

Limit Screens Before Bed

Screens can overstimulate the brain and delay sleep.

- **Turn off screens at least 1 hour before** bedtime and keep out of the bedroom if possible
- Can be useful to **give a warning or set time** when devices will need to be switched off
- **Replace screen time with calming activities** like drawing, puzzles or audiobooks. Switch to a sensory wind-down if this is more appropriate

Watch Food, Drink & Medication

Some foods and medications can affect sleep.

- **Avoid caffeine** (like cola or chocolate) in the afternoon or evening
- **Offer a light snack** like toast or banana if they're hungry
- **Speak to your GP or paediatrician** if you think medication is affecting sleep

If They Struggle to Fall Asleep

It's okay if sleep doesn't come easily – stay calm and consistent.

- **Try breathing exercises or guided relaxation**
- Use a **“worry box”** or journal to help them let go of anxious thoughts
- Encourage them to **stay in bed and rest**, even if they're not asleep yet
- Listening to **a gentle story or music can give them something else to focus on** if they describe having a 'busy brain' that won't switch off. Remember to keep it going all through the night though!

Work Together and Be Kind to Yourself

You know your child best. What works for one family might not work for another – and that's okay.

- **Keep a sleep diary to spot patterns**
- **Talk to your child's school or support team for ideas**
- **Be patient with yourself** – small changes can make a big difference over time

For more information or advice, contact us at info@thesleepcharity.org.uk or visit thesleepcharity.org.uk

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