



STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO IMPROVING YOUR CHILD'S SLEEP

Ah sleep . . . a physiological activity that should be among the easiest of things for us to do each night, and yet, modern living has robbed so many of us of this most basic function.

Millions of people struggle with falling asleep or staying asleep, and this includes many of our children. Approximately 60 million Americans suffer from insomnia, and it is estimated that about [50% of children](#) will experience a sleep problem during childhood. Some of the more common sleep problems in children include insomnia, night terrors, [Obstructive Sleep Apnea](#), bed wetting, snoring, and restless leg syndrome.

"In 1942, more than 90 percent of Americans were sleeping more than six hours a night. Today, almost 50 percent of Americans are surviving on a nightly six hours or less"

– Matt Walker,
Why We Sleep, 2017

While there are specific biological, physiological and other explanations for why individual people have difficulty sleeping, there is a larger set of cultural reasons why sleep has become so elusive in the modern world. Healthy sleeping and waking cycles that were a part of human life for millennia have been altered by new ways of living. With the advent of electricity, urbanization, modernization and ubiquitous technologies that entertain and distract us and keep us awake, humans have lost touch with the basic and natural biorhythms that regulate sleep.

Many people are not aware that being "typical" in modern society – that is, just doing the things that seem to be cultural norms—means you are probably exposing yourself and your children to any number of sleep-stealers. In other words, there are many things that most people do every day that disrupt your body's natural ability to sleep. Some of these factors include:

- Blue lights emitted from most electronic devices
- Blood sugar imbalances from high sugar/high carbohydrate diets
- Caffeine and alcohol consumption
- Lack of natural sunlight exposure during the day (on the eyes and skin)
- [Excitotoxins](#) in food (such as aspartame, MSG, some flavorings and food additives)
- [Microbial imbalances in the gut](#) (often due to history of antibiotics or other medicines or diets high in sugar or refined carbohydrates)
- Indoor sedentary lifestyles lacking movement and exercise
- Stimulant medications (ADHD medications, but also asthma medications)
- And more . . .

Why is sleep so important anyway? And is it really that big of a deal if your child sleeps sporadically, intermittently or less than optimally?

Yes, it is a big deal.

Here is why:

CHILDREN NEED SLEEP!

Children require more sleep than adults because their bodies are growing and their brains are working through an incredibly complex developmental process to optimize language, behavior, attention, motor control, impulse control and more. The adult recommendations are for eight to nine hours a night, while kids need 10-12 or more, depending upon age. Here are some concrete reasons why children need sleep:

- Having both sides of the brain well-connected helps facilitate and maximize learning, memory, and creativity. The strength of these brain connections increases as much as [20% while sleeping](#). Researchers believe that Albert Einstein's genius was related to the fact that his two hemispheres worked well together.
- Myelin, which is the fatty layer formed around the neurons important for language, attention and impulse control, also develops during sleep.
- Researchers recently discovered a lymphatic system in the brain (called the glymphatic system). This lymphatic system is responsible for cleaning out the cellular "junk" (toxins) in the brain and also for bringing key nutrients to brain cells. What does this have to do with sleep? This lymphatic system is largely functional during sleep. If your child has sleep issues, his or her brain is not able to flush out toxins and other cellular debris.
- Sleep replenishes the body on all levels: cellular, endocrine, immune, metabolic, physical and emotional.
- It repairs and restores major organs and brain chemicals.
- Physiologic studies suggest that a sleep deficit may put the body into a state of high alert, increasing the production of [stress hormones](#) and driving up blood pressure.
- In the absence of a good night's sleep, the body and brain begin a slow deterioration that affects all areas of health and function.
- Although the body can survive for a month or more without food, death can occur in a week without sleep. Three nights without restorative sleep can produce a state known as "sleep-deprived psychosis," in which rational thinking is impossible.
- During restorative sleep, the brain and body produce serotonin, a chemical necessary for mood stabilization, coping, attention and memory. The less serotonin available, the less able one is to deal even with the most mundane day-to-day tasks.
- Without adequate sleep, picky kids get pickier, cranky kids get crankier.
- Poor sleepers tend to be poor students as well.

Okay, got it? Sleep is important. So, how does one make their home a sleep sanctuary where restorative sleep is the norm?

Following is a step-by-step guide to getting your family's sleep habits and sleep quality back in shape.



STEP 1: MAKE SLEEP THE PRIORITY

There are tons of hacks and tips about how to help your family sleep better (more below), but none of it will matter until you make the mental shift to see sleep as not only important, but among the most important things you do every day. The first, and most important step, is to make a mental and emotional commitment to making sleep and sleep routines an important part of your family's daily life.

What do you do if your household (your spouse, older siblings, relatives) just doesn't prioritize sleep? Try dropping these little truth bombs on them:

- According to Matt Walker, author of *Why We Sleep*, "Men who sleep five hours a night have significantly smaller testicles than those who sleep seven hours or more. In addition, men who routinely sleep just four to five hours a night will have a level of testosterone which is that of someone who is 10 years their senior." Not sleeping ages you by 10 years!
- Sleep is the only time when your brain truly flushes itself of toxins. Brain cells actually shrink during sleep and the space created by that shrinking increases by 60% to allow for a flushing of fluids out and away from cells. During sleep, cerebral spinal fluid flows into the space, mixes with the interstitial fluid and washes the waste toward the veins and carries it to the liver. This process occurs when you are in your deepest sleep. Imagine using a toilet all day long but never flushing. THAT is what is happening in your brain if you don't sleep. The "toilet" never flushes away the waste and debris!
- [Recent studies](#) have shown that sleep disorders and sleep deprivation are often misdiagnosed as [ADHD](#), as the symptoms are so similar. Could many children with ADHD really just be sleep deprived?

STEP 2: COMMIT TO A ROUTINE

Once you have decided to make sleep a priority, it is important to **commit to a new family routine**. If you don't have a set bedtime or bedtime routine for your children, it's never too late to start. Consider the following ways to establish a new routine.

Explain to your child/children that your family will be starting a new bedtime routine. Let them know what day you are going to start it and what to expect. Most kids don't like it when you spring new routines on them, so prepare them ahead of time.

Here are some ideas of what to include in your routine:

1. Choose an age-appropriate bedtime for your child/children – and stick to it.
2. Approximately one to two hours before the actual bedtime (e.g., at 6:30 or 7:30 if your child's bedtime is 8:30) all electronics/screens/gadgets need to be turned off. Blue light from devices (TVs, phones, computers, video games, etc.) actually block the body's production of melatonin, the important sleep hormone required for sleep.
3. Dim lights in the home. If you have fluorescent, LED or other bright lights in your home, this is especially important. Dimming light (or darkness) is the cue your body needs to begin producing melatonin. Help your child's body out by moving them into a dimmed light environment about an hour before bedtime.
4. Next, it's time for pajamas, toothbrushing, bath, washing up, or whatever hygiene practices your family prefers. Doing the same bedtime routine everyday sends sensory cues to the body to let it know that sleeping time is coming soon!
5. Reading, having a story read to them, or other quiet activity should occur within that hour before lights out.
6. Wake up time should be roughly the same time every day. Routines are important to your body's circadian rhythm (the natural "body clock" that is largely cued by light and darkness).
7. Make sure bedrooms are cool, calm, quiet, dark "media-free zones."



Eliminate sleep stealers! Electromagnetic radiation/electromagnetic frequencies (EMFs) from electronic devices can be a sleep stealer! Keep devices out of the bedroom and minimize exposure to EMFs in the evening. Turn off the WiFi at bedtime, and keep it off until the morning. You may need to disable some "smart" appliances to reduce exposure in your home. To learn more about reducing your EMF exposure, visit ehtrust.org.

STEP 3: EAT TO SUPPORT SLEEP

A body in balance will more easily fall asleep, stay asleep and wake feeling refreshed. While they may not seem directly related, diet and nutrition are a critical part of sleep hygiene. Set your child up for sleep success by optimizing the body's "readiness" for sleep through nutrition and diet.

Here are some concrete ways to support sleep through food:

1. Support your child's gut microbiome for optimal sleep. Microbial diversity in the gastrointestinal tract will ensure that neurotransmitters like dopamine, GABA and serotonin (which are critical for sleep and mood regulation) are produced as needed. Sleep disturbances can be related to gut dysbiosis (when the microbial diversity is out of balance). What's more, poor sleep negatively affects the microbiome, so it becomes a vicious cycle! You can increase microbial diversity by eating a wide variety of organic, whole foods, but especially foods with fiber and prebiotic fiber. Eating probiotic foods like yogurt, kimchi, kefir, fermented vegetables and beverages are another way to increase microbial diversity. Limited diets (or "white food only" diets) = low microbial diversity, so variety is key!
2. Reduce or eliminate sugary foods, but especially before bedtime. Fluctuating blood sugar can create cortisol production, a hormone that keeps you awake and alert. Paleo or keto type diets with fibrous vegetables can help with blood sugar regulation and support the gut microbiome.
3. Be sure to eat protein, B-vitamins, vitamin C and vitamin D (if supplementing) early in the day because these can be stimulating.
4. Remove excitotoxins like MSG, aspartame, and food additives from the diet; consider learning about a [low glutamate diet](#).
5. Hidden environmental/[food sensitivities](#) can contribute to sleeplessness or sleep disturbances (e.g., bed wetting, which can disturb sleep, can be caused by food sensitivities and environmental allergies). Consider having a [food sensitivity test](#) done to identify food culprits or simply try an [elimination diet](#) if you suspect any food offenders (such as gluten, dairy, eggs, etc.).
6. Eliminate caffeine – This includes chocolate or cocoa in the evening.

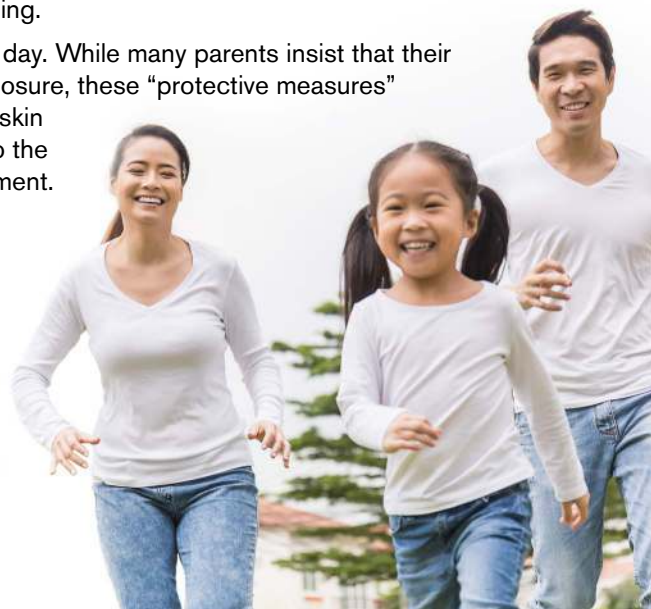
STEP 4: GET OUT AND GET MOVING

One of the absolute best ways to improve a child's sleep is to encourage them to spend a lot of active time outdoors, in natural sunlight. Humans are guided by internal body clocks (circadian rhythm). The circadian rhythm is what tells our bodies what kinds of physiological activities should be going on and when. The body takes cues from its external environment, so it knows when to rest, when to be alert and awake, when to be ready to eat, and when to rest and repair cells and internal functions. If a strong natural circadian rhythm is established (according to appropriate environmental cues like sunrise and sunset), then getting to sleep will occur more naturally and effortlessly.

If a child spends the majority of his/her day inside, on a computer and not being active, the body is going to get the wrong signals and cues. These cues may be telling the body to stay awake, when it really should be sleeping.

Here are some ways to establish a strong and healthy circadian rhythm for your child's body:

1. Ensure that your child gets sunlight on his/her bare eyes (no glasses or sunglasses) first thing in the morning, when the sun is still low on the horizon. Do the same thing in the evening as the sun is setting. Be religious about getting this 10 minutes of sun exposure in the morning and in the evening.
2. Plan for ample exercise and outdoor time in natural sunlight during the day. While many parents insist that their children need sunscreen and sunglasses to protect them from sun exposure, these "protective measures" also impede the body's natural ability to read environmental cues. The skin cannot make vitamin D if sunscreen is blocking out the sun's access to the skin, and vitamin D is critical for children's health, growth and development. Sunglasses interfere with the body's sensory perception of light and dark and sends the wrong signals to the brain. If you are concerned with sunburn, read up on sun tolerance (gradually exposing skin to the sun in safe increments) and properly preparing the body for appropriate levels of sun exposure throughout the changing seasons.
3. Movement, movement, movement. This does not mean that your child needs to be a jock and playing sports year-round, but movement is a fundamental feature of healthy bodies and impacts the quality of their sleep. [Studies show](#) that children who are active during the day tend to have a better quality of sleep in the evening.



STEP 5: ARM YOURSELF WITH SLEEP HACKS

We get it. Many of the suggested guidelines above are challenging to implement in the modern world. Our children's days are structured to be indoors, on screens, sedentary and eating horrible foods. While it is extremely challenging to live "counter-culture," we must strive to break out of these traps of modern living. The human body just isn't designed to live the way humans live in the modern world. While we are doing the best we can to improve diet and lifestyle factors that are within our control (and working to educate others on the health problems caused by modern living) there are lots of "hacks" available to parents to help their children thrive in the modern world. Following are some of our favorite sleep "hacks."

- **Blue-Blocking Glasses.** There are many brands of "blue blockers" commercially available. These are glasses that can be worn while a child is on a screen during the day or evening. These glasses protect the eye from the dangerous blue light emitted from the devices. These are especially important to wear if your child must be on a computer or device in the evening (I'm talking to you, parents of teens!). If your child or teen is having trouble falling asleep and refuses to give up the devices in the evening, ask them to at least wear the blue blockers. Have them try it for a week to see if it helps them fall asleep! You can also adjust the settings on computers and devices to automatically turn on the blue-blocking night-shift mode at a desired time, which may be an easier sell for you to your kids than wearing blue-blocking glasses.
- **Nutritional Supplements.** There are many nutritional supplements that can help support sleep. Talk to your doctor, nutritionist or healthcare practitioner about the choices that might be right for your child. Some of the most commonly used and helpful sleep supports include: magnesium (such as magnesium glycinate), melatonin, GABA, L-theanine, B vitamins (earlier during the day). There are also many herbs that have been used by ancient cultures for millennia and include: valerian, passionflower, chamomile, skullcap, hops, kava kava, etc.
- **Essential Oils.** Essential oils commonly used to calm the nervous system and prepare the body for sleep include: lavender, clove and lime (a combination created by Vibrant Blue Oils purported to move the nervous system into the parasympathetic, or rest and repair, state).
- **Homeopathy.** Homeopathy has been used safely since the 19th century to provide gentle and natural support for sleep. Some of the most common sleep remedies include: Coffea cruda, Chamomila, Aconite and Valeriana. Hyland's Naturals makes a [combination sleep remedy](#) that is easy to find at health-food stores and online.
- **Soothing Sleeping Environment.** The best sleeping environment is one with complete darkness, a cool temperature (lower than daytime temperature), and no sounds.
- **Epsom Salt Baths.** Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) can be helpful for both detoxing the body and calming the nervous system. Consider a warm epsom salt bath (with a drop or two of lavender essential oil) as a soothing and sleep-inducing part of a nighttime routine.

Other tips: Consider using some of the following helpful sleep supports:

- Weighted blankets
- Massage or relaxation techniques like meditation, yoga
- Soothing music
- Acupuncture
- Chiropractic

Still not sleeping? Move onto Step 6 where you can dig deeper into some of the more complex reasons why kids have sleep difficulties.

STEP 6: GET HELP FOR ESPECIALLY CHALLENGING SLEEPERS

Okay, you've done it all. Your child is eating well, getting outdoor exercise, limiting screen time, spending time in natural sunlight. You've tried the hacks above, and sleep is still elusive. Now what?

Sometimes there are more complex reasons for sleep disturbances, and in these cases, it might be time to seek professional help.

Structural Issues, Obstructive Sleep Apnea, Sleep Disordered Breathing

Your child may need to be evaluated for a diagnosable sleep disorder or evaluated for a structural issue that could be interfering with sleep and breathing. Among the most common is [Obstructive Sleep Apnea](#), which is a condition in which a person's airway is partially or completely blocked during sleep, leading to snoring as well as a reduced oxygen saturation in the blood. It is the most common type of sleep apnea. Not sure if your child might have obstructive sleep apnea? Here are some telltale signs that a professional evaluation is in order:

1. Your child has [ADD or ADHD](#), or persistent hyperactivity ("tired but wired" is a common description)
2. Your child snores, drools or sleeps with mouth open (or has mouth open during the day)

3. Your child seems fatigued or irritable during the day
4. Your child has physical features that might include crooked teeth, narrow or small jaw, high arched palate, or a [tongue tie](#)
5. Your child has [speech impairment or delays](#)
6. Your child has [chronic sinus or throat infections](#)

If you suspect a sleep disorder or structural issue, you can find a functional dentist/orthodontist or a myofunctional therapist to have an evaluation. Find a practitioner at <https://epidemicianswers.org/find-a-practitioner/>

Emotional Issues That Can Interfere with Sleep

Does your child have trouble sleeping when a parent is away? Or does your child need a parent present to fall asleep? This may mean there are underlying emotional issues or anxiety. This is a much bigger topic and beyond the scope of this ebook, but it may merit seeking professional help. There may be specific reasons underlying a child's anxiety and could be related to trauma or abuse, but can also be related to microbiome and neurotransmitter imbalances as well as nutritional deficiencies. If you suspect your child is not sleeping due to anxiety or another emotional issue, consider working with an integrative practitioner to get to the root of that anxiety. You can find a practitioner who specializes in these types of issues at <https://epidemicianswers.org/find-a-practitioner/>

Cyclical/Occasional Sleep Disturbances

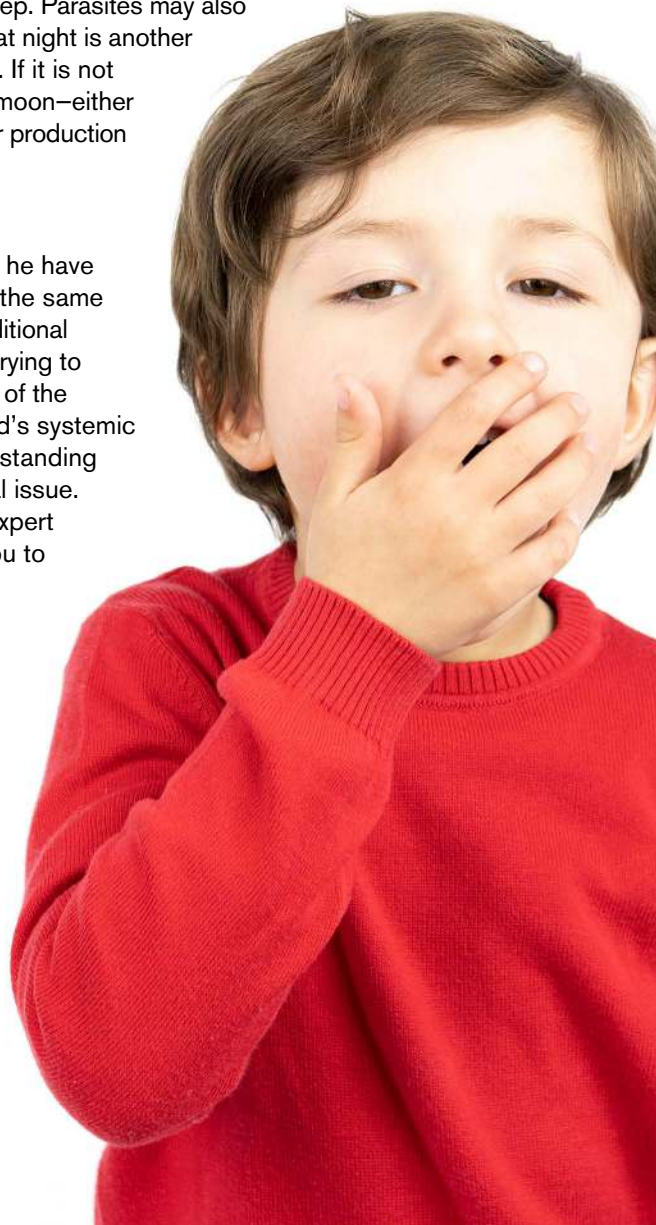
Do you notice that your child seems to have sleep disturbances on occasion? Perhaps once every few weeks or for a few days once a month? It might be a good idea to use a sleep journal. Keep track of your child's sleep pattern over the course of a month and you might find common patterns. For example, some parents report that their children's sleep patterns are disturbed when it is a full moon. Sound like science fiction? There is [evidence](#) that some parasites are most active during a full moon and may disturb the host's sleep. Parasites may also interfere with our circadian rhythm. If you suspect parasites (tooth grinding at night is another tell-tale sign), ask your healthcare practitioner about testing for parasites. If it is not parasites, it might just be that your child is sensitive to the effects of a full moon—either from the increased light or ([as evidence now shows](#)) from the effect of lower production of melatonin during the full moon phase.

Solving Night Waking—What Traditional Chinese Medicine Says

Does your child routinely wake up at the same time each night? Or does he have a habit of sleep disturbances (like night terrors or sleep walking) around the same time each night? Perhaps Chinese Medicine has something to offer. Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners might ask this question because they are trying to understand what organs or organ systems might be active during the time of the waking. Knowing this might provide clues into the root-causes of your child's systemic imbalances. Organ systems are also associated with emotions, so understanding the time of night wakings might just point to a buried or hidden emotional issue. Consult a professional Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner for an expert opinion on the matter, but we've included an illustrative body clock for you to get an idea of how the Chinese Medicine body clock works.

What time does child experience night wakings?

- 9-11 pm is governed by the “triple warmer”— blood vessels, adrenals, and thyroid – which is associated with paranoia or confusion.
- 12-1 am is governed by the gallbladder and associated with feelings of resentment or bitterness.
- 1-3 am is governed by the liver, and wakings could be related to overwhelmed liver/detoxifications issues as well as blood-sugar issues, which are controlled by the liver. This system is also associated with anger, frustration and rage.
- 3-5 am is governed by the lungs, which are also a detox organ and associated with grief and sadness.
- 5-7 am is governed by the large intestine and is associated with stagnation, guilt or feelings of being “stuck.”



A FINAL NOTE ABOUT SLEEP

Healthy sleep is one of the most important gifts you can give to your child. Other symptoms, whether they are mood and behavioral or physical symptoms like eczema or allergies, will likely improve once a solid sleep routine is established. Be patient with yourself and your child as you work on building stellar sleep habits, as changes take time to implement and take hold.

BOOK RESOURCES

[Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Syndrome](#)

[Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child, 5th Edition: A New Step-by-Step Guide for a Good Night's Sleep](#)

RESOURCES: ARTICLES

[Sleep Issues](#)

[Obstructive Sleep Apnea](#)

[Neurotransmitter Imbalances](#)

[Optimizing Blood Sugar](#)

[Sleep Solutions](#)

[Cortisol / Adrenal Dysregulation / ACTH](#)

[Jessa: Sleep and Pain Improvements After Tongue-Tie Release](#)

RESOURCES: WEBINARS

[Obstructive Sleep Apnea and ADD/ADHD](#)

[Responsive Sleep for Toddlers to Tweens](#)

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