

# Sleeping it Real

Every day, we believe in the power to succeed and shine.

To succeed and shine, we need awareness of our own gifts and strengths, and the opportunity and courage to nurture and 'grow' these talents. But, one of the key ingredients here is...SLEEP.

Quality sleep is essential for our physical and mental well-being, and optimum brain function. It is directly related to our capacity for learning and remembering, our creativity, attention span and ability to solve problems.



Children also need sleep for growth and development. If a child seems unable to regulate their emotions and behaviours, complete activities in a reasonable amount of time, or they seem sad, isolated, accident-prone or lethargic, this can sometimes be a sign of inadequate sleep.

The society we live in today is, undoubtedly, quicker and fuller, more hectic and more demanding. This can sometimes be a lot for a child to process and comfortably handle, especially if they have been at school all day, and have the added pressure of homework and exams, and social stresses.

We feel that a child's free time needs to be balanced and unhurried. They will benefit from having time to relax, let off steam, talk about worries and concerns, do something enjoyable and get outdoors. A child may also feel better about bedtime if they are involved in the decision-making about how their evening time is divided and spent (with clear boundaries, of course!). Relaxation in the hour before bedtime is especially important (swap screens for Audiobooks), and that a child views their bed as a place to sleep, not to do homework or watch T.V.

Children can sometimes carry the weight of anxiety about something that has happened, or fear of something that is about to happen. This can and does have a direct, knock-on effect on a child's ability to switch off and sleep soundly, which can, in turn, increase the anxiety. Therefore, it's important for them to have a safe outlet to explore and resolve any inner conflicts, and boost their self-image/self-esteem.

Regardless of which came first, the cause-effect cycle of sleep deprivation and daytime struggles cannot be overlooked. Perfect sleep is not the goal, but we can definitely encourage deeper, more peaceful sleep when we feel safe, calm, warm and trouble-free.

Raising A Warrior: The Activity Guide will steer children through numerous activities aimed at time-management, stress-resolution, playing outside and solving problems.

## **DO YOU FEEL THAT AN EMOTIONAL PROBLEM MAY BE AFFECTING YOUR CHILD'S SLEEP?**

Firstly, it's so important to find out why your child might be feeling angry/sad/frustrated, and why they seem to be struggling with sleep. Approach this with open-ended questions. What has made you so sad today? How does it feel in your head and body when that happens? Can you describe the situation for me? ALWAYS respond with compassion and sympathy/empathy. Try not to take it personally if it is about you. It may even be something you don't know about yet. If they don't want to tell you, ask if there is someone else they want to talk to, or offer alternatives for expressing their feelings, such as writing it down. Let them know that it's OK to feel what they're feeling, whatever it is. They need to know that they will be loved and liked, and supported, whatever is going on in their heads/lives.

Set aside some one-on-one time with your child so they can off-load, if they want to, or just spend some quality time with you. They should always feel that they can come to you with concerns and worries, and know that they're not going to be belittled or ignored. Statements such as, "oh, don't worry - that doesn't seem so bad," or, "that's silly - that's not real," may not help the situation. A child may feel sent away to deal with the worry alone. It's always going to be our instinct to try and take the worry away, so a response such as, "yeah, that sounds really upsetting. I can see why that's making you feel sad," will be much more effective.

Have fun with your child so that you can offset the worries with positive experiences and memories. Create activities and set time aside for them to: 1) make a dream-plan; 2) create a positive space to spend time; 3) get outdoors; 4) earn and save money; 5) focus on the positives; 6) plan to do something they've missed or haven't tried; 7) do something kind for somebody else; 8) change their wardrobe/room to reflect who they want to become.

If you feel that your child is experiencing burn-out and that this is affecting their ability to switch off, work with them to create a timetable for their free time, which incorporates necessary commitments AND gives them some control over how they want to spend that free time. Help to set realistic boundaries and time-frames with this, but don't take over.

If they are going through a particularly defiant stage and perhaps taking this frustration/anger to bed, but, if it is in their best interests to follow the rules and boundaries you're trying to set, explain why. Give them clear explanations about your motives. Ask their opinion. Ask if they have understood. If they are struggling to follow the 'rules', try to explore why, with empathy. And then empower your child to join in with the decision-making and planning for how to improve the situation. Listen to what they're saying to you. If they feel heard and respected, that defiance-button is less likely to get pushed.

## **PRACTICAL SLEEP SUGGESTIONS**

If you're experiencing sleep difficulties with your child, it's always worth asking the obvious/practical questions first. Has my child:

- 1) started their day at a 'normal' time – as in, not too early but not too late? Generally speaking, children will cope well with a 12-15 hour day, and need 9 – 12 hours' sleep at night depending on the age and individual needs of the child.
- 2) had a good balance of stimulation and down-time today? It's very important for children to be stimulated academically, socially and physically, but to also have 'switch-off' time too.

- 3) eaten balanced, nutritious food throughout the day, had some physical exercise and been outside in natural daylight? These can all contribute to improved sleep, as the body will be healthier, energy will have been expended and the inner body clock (circadian rhythms) will have been 'set' for quality sleep at night.
- 4) had a good, hearty evening meal, ideally a couple of hours before bedtime but not too early? An evening meal which includes carbohydrates and foods containing tryptophan (meat, cheese, eggs, fish, poultry), which help the body produce melatonin: the sleep hormone, may improve sleep quality.
- 5) avoided excessive sugary snacks and treats in the evening? It goes without saying that any foods high in sugar or e-numbers are going to affect sleep – and not in the right way.
- 6) had enough time to unwind before actually going to sleep? It can be incredibly hard for a child to access a sleepy state if the activity they were involved in just before bedtime was too stimulating. That's not to say that screens, TV and/or computer games should not be part of their evening routine at all. But, they will benefit from having at least 30 minutes dedicated to quiet reading, journal-writing, listening to music or audio-books or just talking, in the run up to going to sleep. And this will all work more effectively if part of a repeated, predictable routine.

It's also worth looking at their sleep environment too. It can definitely help to switch off all harsh lights in the house, an hour or two before bedtime, especially in the bedrooms themselves. This will help transition the body into a sleepier state. And try to make sure that your child's actual bed is for pre-sleep activities (reading, journals and talking etc.) and sleep only. It is a lot harder for the body to recognise it as a sleep space if it has been used for, for example, homework or TV.

And always keep an eye on the overall quality and quantity of your child's sleep. The old saying, 'Sleep Breeds Sleep' is most certainly correct!