



# Sleep Toolkit for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Guidance and support aimed at parents and carers, and those working with families with special educational needs and disabilities

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## Sleep Guidance for children with SEND

Sleep is the same as any other skill that has to be learnt. It needs to be based on repetition, clear routines and patience. Therefore, if your child faces additional barriers to learning and development, then they may need extra help to learn the routines around sleep. This is likely to involve small steps over time and acknowledgment that this can be a challenge- especially if you are sleep deprived yourself.

The most important messages are still those given in the [South Gloucestershire Sleep Toolkits](#); **Early Years** – Birth to five years **Childhood** – Five to 13 years **Adolescence** – 13-to-18-year olds

In this SEND toolkit, we will address some additional questions about sleep that are often raised. These are broken down into different areas of need and we hope this will help you problem-solve with your family or alongside any professionals involved. There are likely to be extra worries and anxieties that come with having a child with additional needs, especially about leaving children alone during the night. As we all naturally wake up several times a night, if your child is unable to fall asleep alone then each time they wake (mostly likely every 90 mins), they will look for you. They may therefore find it difficult to fall back to sleep without your help. Supporting your child fall to sleep alone will help them do this in the night during natural night waking.

The introduction page in each age-specific sleep toolkit (see above links) provides further information about sleep cycles. It is important to also be aware of the larger impact that certain events can have on the sleep of children with additional needs (e.g.- Christmas, holidays, the clocks changing).

### Who has produced this toolkit?

This set of toolkits was produced in partnership with: School Health Nursing, Sirona care & health, Kings' Forest Primary School, King's Oak Academy Primary School, Off the Record, South Gloucestershire Council - Public Health & Wellbeing, Early Years Team, Educational Psychology, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

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[www.southglos.gov.uk](http://www.southglos.gov.uk)



# Language and social understanding

## Sleep language

*Children with language difficulties may have issues understanding the routines around bedtime and communicating to you how they are feeling:*

- Do you use repetitive phrases at bedtime? E.g. “It’s bedtime now, it’s time to rest”
- Do you use visuals to show a clear routine before bed?
- For younger children, do you use a bedtime song to reduce the language barriers?
- Do you carry out the routine only in the bedroom and bathroom to keep this clear and consistent?
- Are you aware of Makaton signs related to sleep?

## Sleep and social understanding

*Your child might not pick up on social cues that lead to bedtime. They may not understand what needs to happen so will need to know more about why and when they need to sleep.*

- Does your child have positive sleep associations that are separate from you?
- Do you use visuals to show a clear routine before bed?
- Could you read books that explain sleep or write a Social Story?
- Could you use the same story every night?
- Does your child use an object that signals when it is the morning?
- Would your child like a reward chart around sleep?

Additional information and advice on sleep and some useful links can be found in the “**Further information and where to get help**” section at the end of this toolkit.

# Sensory Processing and Emotional Regulation

## Sleep and Sensory Processing

Sensory issues may mean a child is over or under-stimulated at nighttime. Adjusting the environment to help regulate this will be important:

- If your child finds bath time overstimulating, could this be done earlier in the evening?
- Do you use massage as a way to calm at bedtime?
- Have you tried using a red light for a night light?
- Have you tried introducing a scent to the bedroom?
- Have you tried black-out blinds in the bedroom?
- Does the child have access to calming music?
- Do you tuck the duvet in tightly to the bed?
- Is the bedroom a comfortable temperature, between 16-18 C?
- Are the bedroom walls calm colours?

## Sleep and Emotional Regulation

*Some children can be anxious or emotionally overwhelmed. These children need a calm bedtime routine which reassures them and helps them 'love their room' and hold you in mind. Children may also come to expect the boundaries and routines of bedtime, which could lead to resistance or an increased need for connection.*

- Does your child associate bedtime with playtime or screen time? Could this be encouraged elsewhere?
- Do you keep 'wake times' consistent (e.g.- 7am every day)?
- Does your child have opportunities to emotionally connect with a family member before bedtime?
- Do you make time in the bedtime routine for talking through the day and asking questions about feelings?
- Have you tried a visual 'bedtime pass' that the child can use during night-waking?
- Does your child have a transitional object (e.g.- teddy/ muslin) for bedtime?
- Could you help your child 'practise' feeling calm during the day, away from the bedtime routine? Can you help calm activities become familiar to your child and then introduce them at bedtime?

Additional information and advice on sleep and some useful links can be found in the “**Further information and where to get help**” section at the end of this toolkit.

# Health and parent resilience

## Sleep and Physical Health

*Health issues in children can disrupt the routine of bedtime because of night-feeds, continence issues or discomfort. Sleep apnoea can be a side-effect of some conditions and lead to increased night-waking.*

- Are you aware of foods that promote sleep and can the child have these during a 'supper' time?
- Do you keep a sleep diary for your child's routine and symptoms?
- Are relevant professionals aware of sleep issues?
- As your child taking medication that may cause sleep-related side effects?
- Have you spoken to your child's school about any sleep issues to inform them of possible impacts?

## Sleep and Parent Resilience

Sleep disturbance can affect the whole family and it is therefore important that parents feel supported to develop the healthiest routines for everyone.

- Do you and your partner take it in turns to respond in the night?
- Do you and your partner agree on the importance of the routine and consistency?
- Do you avoid using the bedroom as a consequence for bad behaviour?
- If your child moves between two homes, do you keep the routine and environment as consistent as possible?
- At weekends, do you keep bed/wake times no more than an hour different to weeknights?

Additional information and advice on sleep and some useful links can be found in the "**Further information and where to get help**" section at the end of this toolkit.

## Resources

### Help and Information

The resources below are suggestions that link to the questions raised above. We hope they provide some visual examples and ideas if you feel you need to try something new. It is

important to note that one specific item or resource is unlikely to be an easy fix to sleep! The routines, communication and consistency of anything used is key.

**Visual aids to help make the bedtime routine clear can be found on these links:**

<https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/children-with-send/>

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Sleep%20Quick%20Tips.pdf>

**Social Story to explain sleep further to children can be found on:**

[Sleep Social Stories \(happylearners.info\)](http://happylearners.info)

### **Calming music/sounds**

**Calming sounds** such as waves, rain and white noise can be calming. These can be searched online or bought on CD. Audio books may also be helpful. Links include:

[www.rainymood.com](http://www.rainymood.com)

[www.asoftmurmur.com](http://www.asoftmurmur.com)

[www.noisli.com](http://www.noisli.com)

**Bedtime Pass visual aid which can be used to request something during the night:**

[www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)

**Sleep diary examples:**

<https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/sleep-diary-for-kids/>

## **Further information and where to get help**

**South Gloucestershire Sleep Toolkits**

*There are three other Sleep toolkits, categorised by age group, available on the [South](#)*



[Gloucestershire Council website](#). The three toolkits are: **Early Years** - Birth to five years  
**Childhood** - Five to 13 years **Adolescence** - 13- to 18-year-olds

#### Useful links

- [Sleep advice for parents with disabled children | Family Lives](#)
- [Sleep Challenges - A Sensory Life!](#)
- [Sleep Tips - Cerebra](#)
- [Parents and families \(autism.org.uk\) – NAS sleep guide](#)
- [ATN/AIR-P Strategies to Improve Sleep in Children with Autism | Autism Speaks](#)
- [PowerPoint Presentation \(autismspeaks.org\)](#)
- <https://camhs.rdash.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DP8668-Sleep-information-forparents-of-children-with-ADHD-leaflet-01.21.pdf>
- [Helping your child to sleep | Disability charity Scope UK](#)
- [Managing-Sleep-Problems-In-Children-21st-March-KP-28th-June-SM\\_DSMIG.pdf \(downs-syndrome.org.uk\)](#)