



Parenting during pandemic

Day 11: The importance of sleep during the pandemic and how to ensure you and your children get the best sleep possible

We spend a lot of time sleeping and we feel significant effects if we don't get enough sleep. During the pandemic, sleep is part of the narrative of what's going on generally in society. For example, the news reports on the extremely long work hours of frontline staff and mentions sleep deprivation; comedians and others talk about their experiences at present consisting of getting up, not doing much and then sleeping; and parents in lockdown think about their own sleep and that of all children in the home.

There are likely to be a number of situations at present around parenting in relation to sleep. Some parents are sleeping when the children sleep because that's their only chance to sleep. Some parents are worrying about teenagers who stay in bed most of the day. Some parents are balancing working at home while looking after children at home and trying to be the substitute teacher so sleep can seem quite far down the priority list. Sleep routines may have moved around the clock to be a little later to bed and a little later up – or a lot later in some cases. Some people are napping during the day.

Often when we can't sleep, we will worry about this. Usually the worry is because we are afraid of the horrible tired feeling we get when we haven't had enough sleep. During the pandemic, people will worry about all sorts of things and start to make assumptions or shift their perspective based on their experience. For example, there are likely to be worries if people can't get to sleep just now about "maybe it's because I didn't do enough in the day so I'm not tired" or "I'm having to fit in so much in the day that I can't switch off but if I don't sleep now tomorrow will be terrible".

Here are a few things that we hope will help for both children and parents.

1. Try to keep to a routine

The biological changes that happen in our brains to signal that it's time to sleep are triggered, to some extent, by the routines we set up for ourselves. This is the case for both children and adults so try to have a routine around what happens before bed. For example,

getting washed, changing into pyjamas and brushing teeth can all be part of the routine. It's easy to slip into new routines around getting up later and going to bed later, particularly during lockdown, but this will make it really difficult to transition out of lockdown and back to more typical routines.

Sticking to the routine everyday can be helpful. Both during and outside of lockdown, some people will want to get up later on days off but this can make it difficult to get up at the usual time for the first day back to school/work etc.

2. The sleep environment is important

You may remember from previous blogs that we have mentioned trying to keep the sleep environment separate so that it is associated in our brains with sleep. If bed is a place to play or to work or to study, it won't be so associated in our brains with sleep whereas if this is the place we go to sleep, the association in our brains can make it easier for us to get to sleep there.

3. Lighting

We said our routines trigger some of the biological changes that happen in our brains to signal time to sleep but another important trigger is light. When the light dims, our eyes pick this up and send signals to our brain to start getting ready to sleep. We can feel this as tiredness or sleepiness but it is actually the release of melatonin in the brain telling us to prepare for sleep.

4. Temperature, noise, comfort

These are all things that can have effects on our sleep so where we have control over them, it can be helpful to do so.

5. Sleep and daytime activity

Keeping healthy during the day, including having some exercise, is important for sleep. During the pandemic, there may be some difficulties with this in that our typical activities used to keep healthy may be unavailable so we may need to be creative in how we maintain healthy habits and still get some exercise.

6. Eating and drinking

Too much food late at night can cause difficulties with sleep. Equally, it's important to consider what we are drinking. Caffeine is a stimulant so it's not good to have too much of this before bed. Similarly alcohol and smoking.

7. Relax before bed

It can be helpful for both children and adults to try some relaxing activities before bed. This can include having a warm bath, trying some relaxation such as progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, yoga etc.

8. Avoid screens

This is linked to the point about lighting above. Looking at bright, stimulating screens doesn't allow our eyes to notice dimming light and our brain to release the melatonin that helps us feel sleepy.

9. Worries

Sometimes struggling to sleep can be due to worrying about things and not being able to switch off at night due to these worries. If this is the case, have a look at our free resources on managing anxiety during COVID-19 [here](#).

10. Don't let sleep itself become a source of worry or conflict at home

If you are reading this and becoming concerned about the routines that have been developing at home during the pandemic, our advice is: give yourself a break. There will be lots of things you are trying to do during this strange time and if sleep routines have slipped a bit then just try to have a bit of a focus on this for a few days. If you are finding that bedtime is a time where there is a lot of conflict and you are arguing about getting to bed, take a look at our blogs about [limit setting](#) and [rewards](#).

If you are at home with a child who really struggles to sleep, perhaps you would usually have some nights of respite outside of lockdown, try to use all of your sources of support to keep clam and try to sleep when you can for the time being. If you are really worried about your child's sleep, feel free to contact us to discuss what may help.

We hope these tips are helpful. Well done on managing another day off school and we hope you will join us again tomorrow.

Tomorrow's topic: Narrative therapy. Let's tell your story of parenting during the pandemic.

Please [contact us with questions, comments or topics](#) you'd like to see covered. We'd love to hear your feedback.

Wishing you a safe and healthy path through this pandemic.