Lifestyle changes to promote better sleep

Sleep issues are often linked to what your child does during the day, not just at night. You can promote better sleep and address some sleep problems by looking at your child’s daytime behaviour. In particular, your child needs to eat regular, healthy meals, enjoy positive social relationships, and get regular physical activity.

Here are more ideas to improve the amount and quality of your child’s sleep.

Routines
- Encourage your child to go to bed and get up around the same time every day. Keep wake-up times on school days and weekends to within two hours of each other. This can help get your child’s body clock into a regular rhythm.
- Be sure to allow plenty of time (for example, 40 minutes) for your child to do wind-down activities before bed. This way, he’ll be ready to catch a ‘wave’ of sleepiness when it comes. Good wind-down activities might be warm baths, warm milk drinks, writing in a journal, reading a book or magazine, or listening to quiet music.
- If your child has a busy morning routine, encourage her to use some wind-down time at night to complete morning tasks, such as getting clothes ready for the next day, making lunch or getting her school bag ready.
- If your child naps during the day, make sure the nap is in the early afternoon. Keep it to no more 20 minutes. Daytime naps longer than 20 minutes can make it more difficult to get to sleep at night, to get into the deep sleep you need at night, and to wake up in the morning.

Your child’s sleep environment
- Turn off electronic stimulation in your child’s bedroom at least one hour before bedtime. This includes loud music, mobile phones, computer screens and TV. Switching off mobiles can be hard for young people, but late-night phone calls and text messages can mean broken sleep. Encourage your child to connect with friends during the day instead.
- Change your child’s sleep space if necessary. A dark, quiet, private space is important for good sleep. Talk with your child about how her bedroom is affecting her sleep.
- Ensure your child feels safe at night. Praise and reward any signs of bravery if your child is fearful. Avoid scary TV shows, movies, computer games or books. Some children with major bedtime fears have been helped by having a night light or a personal alarm under their pillow.
- If your child is ‘clock watching’, encourage him to turn his clock around or move it to where he can’t see it.
- If your child can’t get to sleep straight away, she could try getting up and doing something relaxing like reading under dim light. When she feels tired, she can go back to bed. In the mornings, she should get out of bed when she wakes up, rather than trying to go back to sleep.

Good health and nutrition
- Make sure your child has a satisfying evening meal at a reasonable time. Feeling hungry or too full before bed can cause people to feel more alert or uncomfortable. This can make it harder to get to sleep.
- Encourage your child to get as much natural light as possible during the day, especially in the morning. This will help his body produce melatonin at the right times in his sleep cycle. A healthy breakfast also helps to kick-start the body clock.
- Encourage your child to avoid caffeine (in energy drinks, coffee, tea, chocolate and cola) – especially in the late afternoon and evening.
- Physical activity has been shown to increase the total sleep time of children during adolescence. It’s not a good idea to play sport or be active late at night, though. The stimulation and increase in body temperature can make it harder to get to sleep.

Other ideas
If worries and anxieties affect your child’s sleep, you could work on the problem together during the day. Your child could also try writing anxious thoughts in a journal.

It’s always a good idea to praise your child when you notice she’s trying to make changes to sleep patterns or is trying out strategies you’ve discussed.