

SLEEP TIPS FOR ANXIOUS KIDS (AND PARENTS)

There is no small amount of advice for parents around sleep, and there is no small amount of parents with children who have long standing sleeping issues. Anxiety can interfere with many aspects of sleep including:

- Difficulty establishing a solid sleep routine
- Children sleeping in the parent's bed longer than the family plan
- Also, disrupted children's sleep means disrupted sleep for others in the home

Bedtime can be an emotional time; some of those emotions can be worry. Quieter times of night can mean the mind is less engaged in fun activities and the worry thoughts can creep in. Children may seek out someone to help manage their feelings when they feel overwhelmed and may engage in behaviours to keep parents close (Can I have a snack? Can I have a cuddle?). Sleeping alone is a skill and parents are the teachers and coaches. However, there are many traps for parents along the way. Breaking bad habits as soon as possible could prevent those 'just for one night' moments from becoming years of sleep problems for the whole family.

Parents often want to soothe their children into sleep, and remove the distress from what could be a troubling day. Think about your role in bedtime routines and how they will learn to fall asleep. The way they fall asleep at bedtime will be what they need to get back to sleep in the night. Creating a routine that they know and are able to follow will help decrease the amount they depend on you during the night.

Here are some environmental factors that Dr. G. Hanley recommends parents use to support their sleep plan.

Sleeping Conditions

The conditions you need to fall asleep must be there all night, in case the child wakes up, so they can fall back asleep more easily. Fans or noise machines need to be on all night.

TEMPERATURE: it is easier to sleep in a slightly cooler room than a warm one.

LIGHT: reducing light is essential to our body making melatonin. NO screens (computer, TV, etc.) one hour prior to bed, and lower all lighting if possible.

ACTIVITY: choose a 'body calm but mind busy' activity for that screen free time. It could be reading in the bedroom, drawing or listening to a story. (Having a parent coach the activity may be necessary until the child learns the skill of calming and falling asleep.)

FOOD: having a small snack that includes protein can help. Do not have a big meal!

Caution about food: Full bellies do not stay that way all night; do not get used to sleeping after a meal.

Tackling Sleep Issues

First, talk to your child's doctor, some children with intellectual disabilities experience disrupted sleep because of differences in their body/brain chemistry.

Choose the time to dig in. Not when you are preparing for a big meeting, or the week before a trip, but a time when you as a parent can afford to be up all night with the new plan. The beginning will be a time of trial and error, until you find what works best for you child. The idea is to find something that suits them, and stick with the routine.

A good night's sleep is essential for a good day!