

Sudden death
Sleep disturbance in children
under 10 years of age



Relatives Guide

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Sleep

Sleep is essential for your health, memory, concentration, and energy. Without sleep, people find it hard to work and get things done. Most of us do things around bedtime that make us sleepy and ready for bed. Some people like warm milk, a favourite book, or late-night TV to help them settle down. Others don't like TV or reading close to bedtime, and won't find it relaxing.

Just like an adult, your child's routines before bedtime will affect their sleep. Some things help them get to sleep quicker, and some things keep them awake. Some children need more or less sleep than average. Some children have night time fears that keep them awake. You can help your children through their sleeping difficulties with support and action.

Dreaming and sudden death

Dreams help us deal with emotions and memories. They also prepare us for the day to come. Disturbing dreams and nightmares are normal and healthy after a sudden death. Some people will dream about what happened; others have upsetting dreams that make very little sense. These become less frightening and more general as children come to terms with what happened.

Some upsetting dreams can wake your child at night, or you might wake them up if you know they are having a nightmare. Interrupted dreams – dreams you wake up from before they end – are the most upsetting. They are easier to remember – normally we forget dreams that don't wake us up.

Letting your child sleep when you know they are having a bad dream may seem uncaring, but it is better that children don't remember the scarier side of their emotions.¹

¹ For more information see : "Dealing with Nightmares" on page 10

What are sleep disturbances?

Sleep disturbances are common in children after a shocking event (like sudden death). Your child may have:

- difficulty getting to sleep
- difficulty getting good quality sleep
- difficulty staying asleep – nightwaking or waking very early in the morning

Sleeping patterns change with time, so your child can have different problems at different ages. You may find:

- your child doesn't want to go to bed
- they want to sleep in your bed (or a brother/sister's)
- they wet the bed after previously being dry at night
- they have nightmares
- they wake during the night (regularly or from time to time)
- younger children may have night terrors (waking up screaming with no memory of a dream)
- they wake very early in the morning
- they are sleepy or irritable the next day

Problems like these usually fade with time. However, some children will need support from you to overcome their sleep disturbances (particularly if they have shocking memories or fears about what happened). You can help your child by checking for the following:

- Signs of stress (irritability, anxiety, clinginess)²
- Fears about safety (for themselves or other family members)
- Bedtime fears
- Changes to the bed/bedroom – different temperature, amount of background light or noise, etc.
- Side effects of medication (some decongestants affect sleep)
- Lack of exercise
- Changes to the bedtime routine – different time, activities (stories, tucking in), adults involved, etc.
- Naps during the day (if your child is older than 5 years of age)

² Please refer to the leaflets entitled "Sudden death in children" for more information on the signs of stress in children of different ages

- Worries that sleeping problems will get worse

For some children, returning to old bedtime routines is comforting – others need to find new ways to wind down at night.

How can I help?

Deal with causes of poor sleep:

Changes to bedtime routines: these are activities such as brushing teeth, reading stories, tucking your child into bed, cuddling, etc. The same person usually carries them out at a regular time each night. Getting your child back to a comfortable bedtime routine is very reassuring.

Changing bedroom: changing where your child sleeps also changes the temperature, light level, background noise, and many other things that your child is used to when they go to sleep. Try to make any changes consistent with what your child is used to.

Medication: some children's medicines (such as decongestants) interfere with normal sleep so you may need to check this with your GP.

Lack of exercise: exercise during the day helps use excess energy. This is important if your child is still active at night following a sudden death. Give opportunities during the day for physical exercise.

Fears about safety: your child may worry about something happening to them, the family, or the home. Sometimes these fears only happen at bedtime. Taking these fears seriously and reassuring your child that they are safe (locking doors and windows together at night) can be very helpful.

Scary dreams and memories: bedtime and early morning are the times your child is most likely remember or dream about what happened. This can make going to sleep difficult (at night or after a bad dream in the morning). Comforters such as favourite blankets, toys, and teddies can help.³

Sleeping arrangements: your child's sleeping habits will change over time. For example, most children will have concerns about safety following a

³ See Appendix: The Worry Stone on page 14

sudden death – they may want to sleep in a room with someone else. It is important to take a balanced approach to meeting these needs, as they will change with time. When they are ready, your child will have to sleep and feel safe in a room on their own.

You can address all of the above causes directly or with the advice of a GP or health visitor.

Distraction – some children are unable to get to sleep because they cannot stop remembering or thinking about what happened. Distraction is one of the most effective ways for children to overcome this. It involves:

- switching attention away from memories or thoughts of what happened before they can play out in your child's head
- focussing your child's attention on something (a mental exercise or activity) that blocks out other thoughts

or

- listening to low, soothing background music (loud enough to comfort but quiet enough to promote sleep)
- using a comfort toy or object (e.g. teddy bear or worry stone – see appendix page 14) that is soothing or relaxing

Have a method of distraction ready before your child's bedtime. For more information on dealing with intrusive thoughts or images, see the booklet entitled "Dealing with intrusions" also available in this series.

Relaxation – learning to relax while you are also dealing with emotional stress can be difficult, but will pay off in the long term. For your child, relaxation can mean getting good exercise and play during the day, or being able to watch a favourite video, listen to music, and hear a story to calm them down at night. Having a place to play alone can be very important and relaxing. Younger children may use favourite toys or blankets to soothe themselves.

Following a sudden or shocking event, your child may need to find new ways of relaxing and unwinding. Some examples are:

- Arts and crafts
- Watching (suitable) TV
- Being read or sang to
- Comfort toy/object
- Exercise
- Playing and talking with friends
- Structured Relaxation (from a tape or parent)
- Reading/Colouring in
- Sitting on a parents knee
- Repeated play
- Sports and games
- Board games
- Water play
- Music or singing
- Controlled Breathing

Most children are able to find their own ways to relax and play. You can help your children by making sure they get enough time to relax (before bed or after a stressful or sudden event).

Guidelines

Be flexible – your child has individual needs and ways of relaxing. What works for one child will not necessarily work for another. Get back to your child's normal bedtime routine (or a routine as close as possible to normal), and think about how stress, noise, temperature, surroundings, timing, diet, and exercise affect your child's sleep. Your child may have individual fears that you need to deal with (checking doors/windows together each night).

- Be patient – some children will return to normal sleeping quite quickly while others will take longer
- What works for one child may not work for another
- What works at one time may not work later on
- Your child will need different routines at different ages
- Be prepared to try different things

Take your child's fears seriously – your child needs to feel safe before they can sleep. Encourage them to face their fears in creative ways. If you think your child is nervous at night – gently encourage them to share any feelings they have and work from there. Do this during the day so that you don't remind your child of their fears near bedtime.

- Take your child's fears seriously
- Comfort them going to bed– give hugs and reassurance
- Have a safety routine (check under bed, lock windows and doors etc)


- Talk with them about how to overcome nightmares and other worries. Creative or fun ideas will appeal to some children more.
- Practice these ideas during the day until your child is comfortable using their idea – get your child to imagine they having a nightmare and using their idea. Examples include – special karate chops to kill monsters; anti-ghost aerosols; the ability to become invisible to bad people; etc...

Have a bedtime routine – getting ready for bed can start either much earlier than bedtime (no sugary drinks or foods for two hours before bed) or five minutes beforehand (making a mug of warm milk). If your child is active or under stress, give them at least 30 minutes to 1 hour to wind down before bedtime – use quiet activities like colouring in or reading stories to do this. Give your child something quiet to do (to keep them occupied and relaxed) if they cannot sleep after they have gone to bed. This is the next best thing to sleep.

- Have a routine of soothing things you and your child can do (for up to one hour) before bedtime
- Avoid activities that make your child more alert – rough play, eating sugary foods, playing computer games etc
- If your child is bedwetting when previously dry, avoid drinks at night-time and get them to go to the toilet just before bed
- Have something for your child to do if they cannot sleep – a toy to play with or comic to read

Aim to build up a consistent and reassuring routine. Some children need to build their routines step-by-step. For example – many children have safety fears and difficulty sleeping following a sudden or shocking event. Being afraid and alone in your own bed, unable to sleep, can make things worse. Sleeping in a room with someone else often helps children relax and sleep soundly, but in the long term, being unable to sleep alone can do more harm than good. After a short time, they should be reassured about sleeping in a room on their own, sleeping with the light off, etc. You may need to do this gradually, as in the four steps set out below:

Step 1: Your child goes to sleep in your bed and sleeps through the night



Step 2: Your child goes to sleep in your bed but is moved to their own bed after they are asleep

Step 3: Your child goes to sleep in their own bed with you or a trusted adult in the room with them (reading a story etc)

Step 4: Your child is tucked in at night by you but goes to sleep on their own

Deal with upsetting thoughts and memories – that are scary and prevent your child from relaxing before sleep. Use distraction or relaxation to prevent or block these thoughts out. Children will not know how to do this for themselves. Describe how to do this in simple terms for them.⁴

- Practice using distraction (or relaxation) with your child until they can do it for themselves
- Make sure your child gets enough relaxation and exercise
- Set time aside during the day to talk about your child's upsetting thoughts and memories. Think about what triggers these thoughts, or how they relate to what happened. Reassure them that these are normal

Relaxation – is the best way to prepare for sleep. Children can become very good at in a short space of time. Spend ten to twenty minutes a day practicing relaxation until your child feels comfortable enough to do it alone. Children learn to relax quicker with practice. There are three formal relaxation methods given at the back of this leaflet that are suitable for older children if you wish to try them out. Tickling their back, brushing their hair, cuddling, etc, can soothe younger children.

- Practice a method of relaxation regularly with your child
- Practice during the day as well (not just at bedtime)
- Try using more than one method (muscular relaxation and then controlled breathing)
- Try to make the experience fun and creative

The future

Sleep disturbance is one of the first signs of stress in children, and often the last to leave. It is a natural response to sudden or dramatic change in

⁴For more information on dealing with intrusive thoughts or images please read the leaflet entitled "Dealing with intrusions" also in this series

children. It can sometimes continue in children after they have dealt with their grief (poor sleep can become a habit). Unless there is a medical or physical reason for disturbed sleep, all children can sleep normally with care and encouragement from adults.

Most children will have some trouble sleeping or dreaming after a sudden death and many return to normal without having to complete any of the steps outlined in this booklet.

For some children, sleep disturbance can have an effect on school, health, friendships etc. Understanding more about sleep (how to develop a bedtime routine, and how to reassure your child about their (often-secret) night time fears will help you get them back to a normal sleeping pattern.

Sleep disturbances can appear immediately or a number of years after sudden death (when they are reminded of what happened). Be prepared for sleeping habits to change in the future – particularly around anniversaries and other reminders – and refer back to the guidelines for advice.



Dealing with nightmares

Facts about nightmares

- Nightmares are a normal part of childhood from the ages of about 3 or 4 years upwards.
- Most children are not awake or aware when they are disturbed by nightmares.
- Nightmares, like dreams, are a natural way of dealing with painful or emotional issues.
- Although nightmares can be very vivid, even to the point where they wake a person up, they are usually more distressing to the person watching than the child dreaming.
- Children and adults are supposed to forget dreams – if children don't spend time thinking about their nightmare immediately after it happens, it will be forgotten.

Guidelines at night

- Allow children who are having nightmares to continue dreaming – this can be one of the hardest things for you to do as a concerned parent. Children who are having nightmares can be calmed with gentle soothing (soft-spoken reassurance, lullabies, holding) that does not wake them up properly, but which can divert the flow of a nightmare.
- Work towards getting your child back to sound sleep as soon as possible – this means avoiding the “wake up, wake up – you’re having a nightmare!” approach. Your child will have trouble getting back to sleep if they wake up scared.
- If your child is already awake, screaming, or thrashing in the bed: go to them; hold them in your arms; make soothing noises; give them a comfort object (e.g. favourite teddy, worry stone); put on soft or dull lighting; comfort them until they calm down.
- Avoid making your child feel that you’ve saved them or protected them from anything or that they are safe only when you are present. They should feel that they are capable of handling the situation – and that nightmares cannot hurt them.
- Avoid being overly sympathetic or fussy about nightmares – children can sometimes see this as a reward.

- Only allow your child to sleep in your bed as a last resort; try leaving the light on low in their room for a while, playing low music in the background, or sleeping alongside your child in their bed first.
- Do not tell children any of the details of what you heard or suspect the nightmares are about unless they volunteer the information. They will most likely forget it naturally when they wake up.

Guidelines during the day

- Maintain a regular bedtime routine and encourage children to do soothing activities like reading a happy story or playing a quiet game before going to bed instead of watching television.
- Take your cue for action from children: ask them did they sleep well last night, or how did they feel this morning when they got up?

If your child has no anxiety about nightmares:

- Avoid discussing nightmares with your child, but talk about feelings of sadness and grief in language they will understand during the day.⁵

If your child has anxiety about nightmares:

- Discuss nightmares with your child during the day – try to get them to name what they feel (younger children need help naming their emotions). Older children may be able to trace back the nightmare to their trauma.
- Make your children feel safe, deal with any specific fears or memories which children may be sensitive to
- Ensure that they realise dreams and nightmares only exist in imagination – they cannot hurt you or control you.

Get your child to imagine happy endings to their nightmares or bad dreams. After some practice, these will be remembered in the nights to come.

⁵ See the leaflet series entitled "Dealing with sudden death" for more information.

Appendix

Deep breathing

Most people breathe very shallowly, using only the top part of their lungs. Deep Breathing allows us to use our entire lungs, providing more oxygen to the body. It is probably the most effective and beneficial method of relaxation around.

Tell your child to lie down on their back and get in a comfortable position.

Ask them to relax their body slowly, starting with feet and moving through every part of the body until you have reached -- and relaxed -- the face and head. "Relaxed" can be described as the fuzzy or warm feeling you get before sleep.

Ask your child to breathe in slowly; first filling the bottom of the belly, then up the tummy, and then the chest and tops of the lungs - almost up to the shoulders. Tell them to hold the air for a second or two, and then to breathe out slowly (empty the very bottom of the tummy first, then further up, then finally the top).

Continue this pattern of breathing for 4 or 5 minutes. Encourage your child not to force the breathing; it won't improve anything for them. Instead, they may want to imagine their lungs are like balloons that slowly inflate and deflate. Deep breathing is the basis of many relaxation techniques. It works well with either guided imagery or progressive muscular relaxation to deepen relaxation.

Guided imagery

Guided imagery is something that all children can enjoy and become very good at in time. It is a skill that uses children's imaginations to help them gain greater control over their own relaxation levels.

- Ask your child to think of a colour, smell, sound, light, warmth, or other pleasant, comfortable feeling that makes them feel peaceful and relaxed.
- Guide your child through a deep breathing exercise.
- Ask your child to close their eyes and imagine that with each breath

they take in, their body becomes filled slowly with their favourite colour, smell, noise, light, warmth, or other pleasant, comfortable feeling.

- Then have them practice – still with closed eyes – breathing in that colour or sensation and sending it (blowing it) throughout the body. If your child, for example, chooses blue, guide them to visualise the blue going down their throat, into the neck and chest, down to the tummy, and so on until they are filled with the beautiful, peaceful, wonderful blue... and are relaxed and in control.


An example of this is the healing light:

Ask your child to sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Clothes should be worn loose.

Ask your child to close their eyes, breathe slowly and deeply, and to listen only to the sound of their breathing for a while.

After a minute or two, tell your child that you are going to call the healing light which will make them refreshed and feel better. Ask them to imagine that a small, bright light is beginning to shine just above their forehead. Tell them that the light is nice and warm and beautiful, but not hot. The light is white (or your child's favourite colour), and it pours down onto their forehead bringing gentle warmth and a pleasant feeling.

You could say (slowly or gently): "You can feel the warmth on your head; it's warming your skin and your hair. Slowly feel this light moving down your face. Even with your eyes closed, you can see this light relaxing all the tiny muscles around your eyes, your cheeks, and your nose. This light is moving down to your mouth, your lips, and covers the front of your face. Your face is shining and loose and relaxed now. Feel this light rolling down into your neck and shoulders, making them bright and relaxed. You can feel your shoulders drop with all the stiffness just melting away. Imagine you can see this light moving down your arms, to your elbows, and down again to your wrists, and your hands. As the light moves, you can feel warmth moving with it. See each finger filling with this healing white light, your hands are tingling and bright and relaxed."



Do the same for the lungs, heart, chest, tummy you're your child to pretend they can breathe or swallow the light to get it inside them), before moving down the legs, knees, back of the calves, ankles, feet and toes. The more detail you use the better; children enjoy learning about their bodies and what they can do with them.

The worry stone

A worry stone is a small smoothed stone (small enough to fit in the palm of a small child) which is rubbed, rolled, squeezed, or squashed whenever a child feels worried. Children's worries are sucked into the stone, where they become trapped and unable to bother anyone. The more a child uses a stone the more powerful it becomes and the quicker it absorbs worries. Children have used worry stones through history – they are a free, easy, and private way to control anxiety. Nowadays they people use them to help control worries, quit smoking, reduce panic-attacks, and control bad memories or thoughts.

- Either buy a worry stone or select a small, *smooth* stone from a beach/garden:
 - It is best to pick a few worry stones and then let your child decide which one they want to use.
 - The stones can be painted or carved afterwards, but they work just as well if left blank.
 - It is best to pick a small, smooth stone because it will allow your child to carry it round in their pockets without damaging clothes, or to use the stone in a public place without being noticed.
 - Make sure you wash the stone clean of germs before use.

Sit down with your child and explain to them how to use a worry stone:

- Worry stones suck up worries like sponges suck up water.
- Once a worry is in a worry stone, it can never get out.
- When you want to get rid of a worry, close your eyes, and squeeze the stone gently until it is tight in your hand (you may want to demonstrate or practice this with your child).
- Concentrate on the stone in your hand and imagine the worry getting trapped in the strong hard stone as you squeeze.

- When you open your eyes, the worry will be gone and you can relax.
- The more you use worry stones the better they become at taking your worries away.

Some children will want to bring their worry stone to school or bed with them. There are different rules for using worry stones in these places.

- When in school, leave the stone in your pocket or someplace near where it is out of view. You don't have to close your eyes when you use a worry stone in school, just squeezing and imagining the worry getting trapped will be enough. As time goes by you will get better at using your worry stone like this, and will be able to use it in class or on the street without anyone noticing. (It is important to inform teachers about worry stones – otherwise teachers may take them away)
- When in bed, don't keep the stone in your hand or in a pocket. Leave the stone in a safe place near the bed (e.g. a locker top) where you can reach for it if you need it. This means you will be able to get the stone without having to turn on the light or move very much.

If your child feels that the worry stone is full or not working as well:


- Washing worry stones in clear water washes all the worries out of them
- Washed worry stones are brand new and completely empty. They will suck up worries extra fast.

Progressive muscular relaxation

Progressive muscular relaxation is a technique that teaches the body to recognise and release tension in muscles. It works by first tensing and then relaxing muscles and noticing the difference. Many people do this naturally with muscle groups such as the shoulders and arms when they have a satisfying stretch.

Example of a progressive muscular relaxation exercise for children:

(– all sections do not have to be completed if time is a problem)



Today we're going to practice some special kinds of exercises called relaxation exercises. These exercises help you to learn how to relax when you're feeling worried and help you get rid of those butterflies-in-your-stomach kinds of feelings. They're also special because you can learn how to do some of them without anyone really noticing.

In order for you to get the best feelings from these exercises, there are some rules you must follow. You must try to do exactly what I say, even if it seems kind of silly. You do this by paying attention to your body. Throughout these exercises, pay attention to how your muscles feel when they are tight and when they are loose and relaxed. You must practice. The more you practice, the more relaxed you can get. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin? Okay, first, get as comfortable as you can in your chair. Sit back, get both feet on the floor, and just let your arms hang loose. That's fine. Now close your eyes and don't open them until I say to. Remember to follow my instructions very carefully, try hard, and pay attention to your body. Here we go."

Hands and arms

"Pretend you are a furry, lazy cat. You want to stretch. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Raise them up high over your head. Way back. Feel the pull in your shoulders. Stretch higher. Now just let your arms drop back to your side. Okay, kitten, let's stretch again. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Raise them over your head. Pull them back, way back. Pull hard. Now let them drop quickly. Good. Notice how your shoulders feel more relaxed. This time let's have a great big stretch. Try to touch the ceiling. Stretch your arms way out in front of you. Raise them way up high over your head. Push them way, way back. Notice the tension and pull in your arms and shoulders. Hold tight, now. Great. Let them drop very quickly and feel how good it is to be relaxed. It feels good and warm and lazy."

Jaw

"You have a giant gobstopper bubble gum in your mouth. It's very hard to chew. Bite down on it. Hard! Let your neck muscles help you. Now relax. Just let your jaw hang loose. Notice that how good it feels just to let your jaw drop. Okay, let's tackle that gobstopper again now. Bite down. Hard! Try to squeeze it out between your teeth. That's good. You're really


tearing that gum up. Now relax again. Just let your jaw drop off your face. It feels good just to let go and not have to fight that bubble gum. Okay, one more time. We're really going to tear it up this time. Bite down. Hard as you can. Harder. Oh, you're really working hard. Good. Now relax. Try to relax your whole body. You've beaten that bubble gum. Let yourself go as loose as you can."

Face and nose

"Here comes an annoying old fly. He has landed on your nose. Try to get him off without using your hands. That's right, wrinkle up your nose. Make as many wrinkles in your nose as you can. Scrunch your nose up real hard. Good. You've chased him away. Now you can relax your nose. Oops, here he comes back again. Right back in the middle of your nose. Wrinkle up your nose again. Shoo him off. Wrinkle it up hard. Hold it just as tight as you can. Okay, he flew away. You can relax your face. Notice that when you scrunch up your nose your cheeks and your mouth and your forehead and your eyes all help you, and they get tight too. So when you relax your nose, your whole body relaxes too, and that feels good. Oh-oh. This time that old fly has come back, but this time he is on your forehead. Make lots of wrinkles. Try to catch him between all those wrinkles. Hold it tight, now. Okay, you can let go. He's gone for good. Now you can just relax. Let your face go smooth, no wrinkles anywhere. Your face feels nice and smooth and relaxed."

Stomach

"Hey! Here comes a cute baby elephant. But he's not watching where he's going. He doesn't see you lying in the grass, and he's about to step on your stomach. Don't move. You don't have time to get out of the way. Just get ready for him. Make your stomach very hard. Tighten up your stomach muscles real tight. Hold it. It looks like he is going the other way. You can relax now. Let your stomach go soft. Let it be as relaxed as you can. That feels so much better. Oops, he's coming this way again. Get ready. Tighten up your stomach. Real hard. If he steps on you when your stomach is hard, it won't hurt. Make your stomach into a rock. Okay, he's moving away again. You can relax now. Kind of settle down, get comfortable, and relax. Notice the difference between a tight stomach and a relaxed one. That's how we want to feel---nice and loose and relaxed. You won't believe this, but this time he's coming your way and no turning



around. He's headed straight for you. Tighten up. Tighten hard. Here he comes. This is really it. You've got to hold on tight. He's stepping on you. He's stepped over you. Now he's gone for good. You can relax completely. You're safe. Everything is okay, and you can feel nice and relaxed. This time imagine that you want to squeeze through a narrow fence and the boards have splinters on them. You'll have to make yourself very skinny if you're going to make it through. Suck your stomach in. Try to squeeze it up against your backbone. Try to be skinny as you can. You've got to be skinny now. Just relax and feel your stomach being warm and loose. Okay, let's try to get through that fence now. Squeeze up your stomach. Make it touch your backbone. Get it real small and tight. Get it as skinny as you can. Hold tight, now. You've got to squeeze through. You got through that narrow little fence and no splinters! You can relax now. Settle back and let your stomach come back out where it belongs. You can feel really good now. You've done fine."

Legs and feet

"Now pretend that you are standing barefoot in a big, fat mud puddle. Squish your toes down deep into the mud. Try to get your feet down to the bottom of the mud puddle. You'll probably need your legs to help you push. Push down, spread your toes apart, feel the mud squish up between your toes. Now step out of the mud puddle. Relax your feet. Let your toes go loose and feel how nice that it feels to be relaxed. Back into the mud puddle. Squish your toes down. Let your leg muscles help push your feet down. Push your feet. Hard. Try to squeeze that puddle dry. Okay. Come back out now. Relax your feet, relax your legs, and relax your toes. It feels so good to be relaxed. No tenseness anywhere. You feel kind of warm and tingly."

Conclusion

"Stay as relaxed as you can. Let your whole body go limp and feel all your muscles relaxed. In a few minutes I will ask you to open your eyes, and that will be the end of this practice session. As you go through the day, remember how good it feels to be relaxed. Sometimes you have to make yourself tighter before you can be relaxed, just as we did in these exercises. Practice these exercises everyday to get more and more relaxed. A good time to practice is at night, after you have gone to bed and the lights are out and you won't be disturbed. It will help you get to sleep. Then, when

you are really a good relaxer, you can help yourself relax at school. Just remember the elephant, or the jaw breaker, or the mud puddle, and you can do our exercises and nobody will know. Today is a good day, and you are ready to feel very relaxed. You've worked hard and it feels good to work hard. Very slowly, now, open your eyes and wiggle your muscles around a little. Very good. You've done a good job. You're going to be a brilliant relaxer."

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Summary

What makes sleep disturbances worse in your child?

- Signs of stress (e.g. irritability, anxiety, clinginess)
- Fears about safety (for themselves or other family members)
- Specific fears related to bedtime
- Side effects of medication (e.g. decongestant medication)
- Lack of exercise
- Napping during the day (if your child is older than 5yrs)
- Changing of routine at bedtime (e.g. timing, adults involved)
- Changes to the setting, level of background noise, or temperature where your child sleeps (e.g. sleeping in a different room)
- Being aware of the distress of the main caregiver
- Worrying that the problem will get worse

Skills for improving sleep

Deal with causes of poor sleep – changes to bedtime routine, surroundings, lack of exercise, inability to relax before bedtime, eating, drinking, or illness/medication. Many children will need to deal with fears about safety.

Awareness and preparation – identify what works for children as individuals and take a balanced approach to suit children's needs at different stages, such as where or whom they sleep with. Work to restore or establish a bedtime routine, and avoid food, drinks, or activities that make children more alert at night.

Guidelines for dealing with sleep disturbances

Take a flexible approach – children have different needs and ways of relaxing (depending on their age, gender, and personality). Sleeping arrangements may need to be changed immediately following trauma, but should gradually return to normal.

Take children's fears seriously – children need emotional and physical reassurance that they are safe, and will often respond positively when encouraged to face their fears in creative ways.



Develop a bedtime routine – a bedtime routine is essential for letting the body know it should prepare for sleep. Children who are very active or under stress may need at least 30 minutes to 1 hour to wind down with quiet activities before going to bed.

Develop strategies for dealing with intrusive thoughts or images – children need practice in how to deal with intrusions if they are scary or preventing sleep. Distraction helps children control their own intrusive thoughts, images, fears, and concerns. Teach your child to use worry stones, comfort objects, nursery rhymes, or favourite songs to control their anxiety where appropriate.

Practice relaxation methods – relaxation is the best way to prepare for sleep, and is a skill that children can become very good at in a short space of time. Children may need to find different methods of relaxing or unwinding than they used in the past - you can greatly help your child by making sure they get enough time to relax whenever appropriate.

