

How to help your kids... sleep!

We bet you know all the reasons your child should get enough sleep. Chances are you've done the research and heard all sorts of advice from your well-meaning friend whose nine year old has "slept through" since birth).

When our kids have sleep issues, it's challenging... for everyone! So be gentle with yourself and go easy on them – they're still learning and things can improve. Here are some tips that can help.

Sometimes we have unrealistic expectations of our kids and sleep but the facts are:

- school-aged tamariki need between 10 and 11 hours of sleep
- not getting enough sleep is common for kids
- as is kids refusing to go to bed
- as are nightmares...

For everything else (i.e. when your child is waking lots, refusing to stay in bed, experiencing bedtime fear), here are some of the best evidenced, tried-and-tested tips.

NIGHTMARES

Let's look at 'bad' dreams first.

- Comfort them without discussing scary things or the nightmare.
- Stay with them until they fall asleep (or leave the light on) but keep them in their bed.
- If they want to discuss the nightmare the following day, get them to think about ways to overcome the 'scary thing' – perhaps they could fly away or stomp on it. Kids have great imaginations and a super cool way to engage it is to draw pictures and get the 'scary thing' out of their heads and into the real world so it feels less frightening.

The most important thing is for children to learn that nightmares just happen sometimes but they're not real and if they need comfort, it's there. This way children don't become too scared of going to sleep.

REFUSING TO GO TO (OR STAY IN!) BED

SET IT UP!

- Create the bedroom as a relaxing place – nothing scary about, no screens.
- Introduce a security 'toy' or blanket (whatever works, but isn't stimulating!) Create a story behind it and how it's designed to help with sleep. Heaps of kids have them! Or ask your child what may help them feel snuggly and calm in their bed and if it's practical and possible, implement this.
- Think about the pre-bedtime activities, especially for kids with super-busy minds. Try changing up the 'lead up' to bedtime with drawing, reading or journaling instead of any 'games' or screens or active play.
- Learn and practise some relaxing breathing exercises together.

ROUTINES & ACTIONS TO TAKE

- Decide on either a ['checking' method](#) or [the 'camping-out' method](#) and discuss this with your child so they're very clear about how this works.
- Create a clear night and bed routine with a specific bedtime. Keep it super low-key. A [routine chart](#) can help.
- As part of the bedtime routine, you might like to:
 - Include a bath and reduction of screen time.
 - Read them their stories in their bed so they get snuggly, warm and tired there.
 - Use music (or a quiet audio book) to help keep them relax. Decide if this is okay for you first, then discuss with your child.
- Decide on a reward for the following mornings and organise this ready to go! Rewarding for about 2 weeks is fine.
- Continue to discuss respecting our own and each other's sleep in your whānau. Have some clear expectations around staying in bed until a certain time in the

morning or doing breathing exercises before getting up to wake others.

GETTING OUT OF BED...

If your child gets out of bed at any time, the deal is to be as boring as possible. We hate saying "don't" but this is a must – don't talk to them, don't make eye contact and don't engage with them! Just guide them back through to their bed. Repeat until they truly understand there is no 'pay off' for getting up i.e. they're not missing out on anything (your time or attention) nor do they get to 'stay up'.

WAKING IN THE NIGHT

Use this same strategy if your child is waking in the night. This is going to take some real consistency and effort, and it's important not to give up. If you know this is going to take some real energy and strength, you might like to consider:

- Gathering your own supports to help – grandparents, other whānau and good friends are often willing to assist with 'through-the-night' strategies. Just ask!
- Starting on a Friday night (when they're most tired). Have a low key day on the Saturday and keep up the praise all day even if there was the slightest positive change.

Keep the routine in place and ensure the rewards (including praise) really do match the amount of effort your child is putting into staying in their bed and/or sleeping through the night. It's a big milestone!

If you try the above strategies and stick with them, and they're still not working it might be best to seek advice from your GP or practice nurse.

REFERENCES

The sleep sections on both of these sites is ace!

www.kidshealth.org.nz
<https://raisingchildren.net.au>

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