

WHY SLEEP IS SO IMPORTANT

Do you feel better after a good night's sleep? How is your day impacted if you don't sleep well? For children who have experienced trauma, sleep can be a nightly battle.

The benefits of sleep

Sleep is vitally important for health and wellbeing, and lack of sleep can significantly impact all areas of life. Good quality sleep can help us focus on tasks, improve memory function, enhance our ability to regulate emotions and provide us with increased sense of energy.

Sleep also has restorative qualities that help us manage life in general. However, for children (and adults) who have experienced developmental or complex trauma, sleep can be a battle every night.

Trauma and disturbed sleep

For many children who have experienced trauma, to be asleep is to be vulnerable. Night-time can be associated with feeling unsafe, and that association can continue even after they have been removed from unsafe environments. Chronic activation of their body's alarm system can also impact on the child's sleep (hyperarousal).

Feeling safe, as well as **being** safe, is what is important for children with sleep problems. If they have experienced a person who was unable to keep them safe, it will take time for them to trust another person.

It may take up to three times longer for these children to fall asleep and they may not enjoy the same quality of sleep as others – often they wake up tired. In adolescence, studies have also shown sleep deprivation leads to increased affect dysregulation, aggression, irritability and impaired frustration tolerance.

What can carers do to help?

- ★ **Be understanding:** Talk with the child about what might be going on and respond caringly.
- ★ **Help the child feel safe:** New environments can be daunting. Leaving a light on or staying with or nearby until the child falls asleep can help them feel safe. As the child begins to develop trusting relationships, the need for support like this usually subsides.
- ★ **Practice good sleep hygiene:** Help the child develop good practices to achieve a good night's sleep, and role model what healthy sleep hygiene looks like.

BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

Tips for building good sleep hygiene

The sleeping environment

Make sure the child's bedroom is a comfortable temperature and noise levels are just right. This could mean putting on low, calming, rhythmic music or sounds as absolute quiet may be unsettling. The child may also feel reassured having their bed face a certain direction, such as towards the door, and they may be particular about the textures of their bedding. Talk with them to find out.

Maintain a consistent wake/sleep cycle

Regular bedtimes can help children maintain a consistent wake/sleep cycle. This can take time to establish and children may need lots of support to move from one (or no) routine to another. Showing patience and kindness are key to children succeeding in establishing new routines.

Set a predictable bedtime routine

It is important to support children to feel safe and relax before bed. A predictable routine may help and can start hours before bedtime. For example, a child might have dinner before their shower each night (or a 'sleep time' or lavender bubble bath) followed by story time with you. Stories that are rhythmic can be excellent for helping calm developmentally younger children. Whatever your family's bedtime routine, the aim should be to encourage and support relaxation before bedtime by ensuring as much as possible the routine is safe and predictable for the child.

Avoid stimuli

Various stimuli can impede a child's ability to fall asleep. Help children by removing or limiting access to caffeine and large meals before bedtime, as well as limiting exposure to bright light and screens.

For some individuals, sleep disturbance may reflect other primary sleep disorders. Carers should seek guidance from their healthcare providers to rule out underlying reasons for any sleep disturbance observed in the children in their care.

Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > Adapted from *Safe Enough to Sleep: Sleep Disruptions Associated with Trauma, Posttraumatic Stress, and Anxiety in Children and Adolescents* by Anthony Charuvastra and Marylene Cloitre (2009): [www.childpsych.theclinics.com/article/S1056-4993\(09\)00033-9/fulltext](http://www.childpsych.theclinics.com/article/S1056-4993(09)00033-9/fulltext)
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