

Creating a sensory routine for sleep

It is a common myth that sleep is a primal instinct. It is not. Sleep is a learned behaviour and one that needs to become a habit.

For a child with sensory processing difficulties (SPD), sleep is a tough one to master. Firstly, the world is too bright, too loud, too stimulating, or worse, not stimulating enough. Secondly, the nature of SPD is that the neurological processes that work between body and brain are disrupted, so the neurological behaviours that create sleep are disordered and not functioning well.

Just to make this more confusing, by the time you have a diagnosis of SPD, your child has learnt some bad habits and some great coping strategies called 'behaviours'.

What we need to do to help a child sleep is create a consistent routine. Here is the hard bit: a bed time routine will take around two hours. Don't stop reading! It is not as bad as it sounds, and much of this routine you're likely already doing.

By two hours, we mean start thinking about how the body is stimulated. What food is your child eating or not eating? What stimuli are they engaging with and not engaging with?

A child with SPD will need

Proprioception and deep tactile two hours and at least 30 minutes before bed time.

They will need linear vestibular input an hour before bed.

They will need sleep inducing foods: warm milk, cinnamon and bananas are a good one. Never put a hungry child to bed and expect 8 hours sleep.

They do need to avoid sugary foods, drinks and additives you know make them over-excited.

They will need to be in a calm state in the build up to bed time.

They will need some sensory input for sleep.

If a child is not going to sleep or is waking, they will most likely need some form of sensory input to stay asleep.

We know that a child with SPD will struggle with their body awareness and their sense of self in space. Have you ever had a dream of falling? Well this is a common difficulty experienced by a child with SPD. They are also more likely to have muscle spasms and contractions known as cramps and digestive dysfunction.

So good sleep protocol would include making sure the tummy is comfy and that a child has done some good stretches prior to going to bed.

Children with ASD and dyspraxia often have very loose hip abductors and tight hamstrings, so do make sure you are stretching the hamstrings regularly.

Sensory strategies:

Movement and body awareness

Two hours before bed try and fit in a big heavy-work work out. This is proprioception- lifting, pushing, pulling and stretching. All of these activities are on your sensory diet. Try a large ball work out, balance beams, therapy ball catch, wall push, push ups and yoga.

One hour before bed provide linear vestibular input. This refers to rocking or swinging but in a backward and forward motion.

15-30 minutes before bed you need deep tactile and proprioception. You have had the big work out, so this should be a quiet activity. Wrapping up nice and tight in a blanket, massage and joint compressions, brushing, being dried after bath in a big warm towel and having cream or lotion rubbed in all achieve this. Story time in a den of bean bags, weighted blankets and pillows, snug as a bug in a rug game, packing away toys, making a bed by shaking out a blanket or duvet also work.

Avoid – being upside down, spinning, falling games, crashing games. These can be included three hours before bed in the after school work out.

Environment

A bedroom should be a sleep-room only. As this is not always possible, make turning their room into a sleep space part of their routine by packing toys away and getting their sleep kit out. Try and have all things cleared from sight and reach. We all know that we will wake early for Christmas or birthdays, so try and avoid your child waking up for a game or a toy. You can use room dividers, neat storage systems and so on. Remember, a busy room filled with toys, is confusing and over stimulating.

If a child is an early riser, rather than leaving their toys around their room, why not set up a box of toys waiting for them in a special place? This can be just outside their door, in a play room or placed on their bedroom floor after they are asleep.

Also, using the bedroom as a punishment is the best way to have a child reject their room.

In the bed time build up - Start reducing environmental stimuli one hour prior to bed time. If you have a dimmer switch, start to gradually turn it down in increments. Turn off overhead lights in favour of lamps. Turn off radio's and TVs. If the TV is on, make it slow and calm programming, so underwater programmes or gentle cartoons like CBebbies bed time hour. Don't have a big family argument or lots of screen time. iPad and so on should be turned off, if possible.

Sound

We can't sound proof a child's world, but we can provide calming and regulating sounds. This will be different for every child, but try some white noise. This refers to monotonous and repetitive low frequency sounds. Waves, wale songs, heat beats or hoover recordings. For some children classical

music or children's songs can work, but you do not want anything that attracts attention. You want sounds that are so consistent they dull attention to sound.

In the bedtime build up- Use cueing songs like a night-time story CD read in a gentle and repetitive voice, lullaby CDs or classical music. Try and keep radios, TVs and lots of people sounding busy to a minimal. Moderate your own voice. Start to cue the body to turning off and shutting down. Watching *Dr. Who* before bed is likely to be over-stimulating so record programmes like that for another time.

Light and visual stimuli

You may find that your child needs all light removed from the room. This will mean black-out blinds. Even if your child likes to sleep with a night light, a black-out blind is advisable as it will reduce other stimuli from getting into the room.

A small light projection display can be really beneficial. You can get high tech ones that turn on with movement, and you can also get ones that turn off after a period of time. If you do feel you need an all-night one for your frequently waking child, make sure it is good quality and will not overheat.

Again, the imagery should be enough to engage a child's attention but not so busy it entertains them and keeps them awake. So you want a repetitive motion rather than a static image.

Try and keep other visual stimuli away from a child's line of sight, as this will change with light change and cast shadows that will engage a child's attention. Lay in your child's bed and see what they have to look at. A blank visual line will encourage them to look for stimulus elsewhere, but a busy visual line will over stimulate. You may want to have a few different light shows or filters as these will keep a child's initial interest.

Try not to use light in the hall as a night light. Use a specific night inside the room that is consistent.

In the build up to bed time - Use cueing lights. Turn off or avoid strip lighting before bed or in the bedroom. This light flickers and is stimulating. Use soft lighting. Turn lights down and shut all the curtains. Turn off blue screens. Keep tablets and mobile phones on no light functions, and if possible, out of a child's room.

Scent (olfactory)

Our sense of smell is one of the most powerful senses. We can have a very big emotional response or memory trigger from a smell. We can also become over-aroused and over-stimulated by a smell and our emotional responses to that smell.

Electronic or plug-in aromatherapy devices are good, as are diffusers. Do make a wise choice for your child and your home when choosing a way to distribute a scent. A hanky with some essential oil, or a massage oil prior to bed are also a great way to cue the olfactory system.

Scents that have known calming and sleep inducing properties are camomile and lavender. Use these in bath oils and lotions. Have the scent around the house and avoid scents you know your child dislikes.

You can also use a wake up scent such as rosemary in the morning to help your child naturally wake.

Touch (Tactile)

As a parent of a child with SPD, you already know that your child can be very sensitive to touch. Make sure night-time clothing is free of any itching items such as rough seams and labels. Also make sure their clothing does not ride up and crease or twist in the night. Make sure sheets are well fitted, and if you use a wet sheet, make sure it is not crunchy and noisy or uncomfortable to the skin.

Children who experience SPD often over-heat or have poor temperature regulation, so make sure you monitor their room and their body temperature.

Many children benefit from a memory foam mattress topper, or a sleeping bag to help them feel supported and reduce the risk of feeling disorganised.

Some children want vibration toys before bed, or brushing. This may be a trial and error process. Most children benefit from some time with their sensory tactile box in the bed time build up.

Behaviour

So we know that most children will do all they can to avoid bedtime, especially during holidays and other special times.

But for a child with SPD we know they have their fair share of challenges at bed time. They will have learnt some very good behaviours to push back bedtime or to make sure we are all up when they are up.

To help a bedtime routine work we need structured, consistent boundaries. We need a consistent routine and we need a pre-decided boundary list. Every adult should use the same approach every day without fail. YES, your child will try and work around this in a thousand ways. They will push, pull and stretch your limits, but if overtime nothing changes and the routine is clear and consistent, they will eventually get on board.

You have probably tried white noise or body lotions. You may have a child who seems to go down to sleep well, but then wakes. So why will it work now? Because you are using all the strategies together.

Work with everyone who is part of the bedtime routine, and choose what the routine will be. Make a picture timetable to go with this so that each step and expectation is clear.

Now pick your language. We do not want to accommodate negotiation. Firstly, this will stimulate a child. Secondly, it will make a career/parent more frustrated. Thirdly, it will break the routine and have you offering all kinds of rewards.

Rewards - A reward chart is a great idea. You can introduce one for bed time that is filled in as you tick off each step of the routine, or just for staying in bed until X time. You decide what the main goal is, but be realistic. If your child wakes 10 times, you may want the reward to be 'only woke 5 times' or 'played in your room quietly'.

We need to understand that even though a child's system is not able to regulate, we can set some realistic expectations around sleep. If you know these expectations before you start your new bed time programme, you will have a head start.

Make sure you create positive experiences around bed time, giving plenty of play and engagement, in the build up to sleep. Then at bed time, you reduce all communication and give one word or minimal answers like "we will think about that tomorrow", "no robot now", "you have teddy/blanket", "quiet time now".

Do not respond to temper tantrums or emotional responses in a big way. Quietly comfort with minimal input and exit the situation calmly and quickly. That said, don't rush any of the routine.

Use positive language: "lovely warm bed", "soft pyjamas", "lovely bedtime cuddle".

A good bedtime routine will vary in each home. Don't worry if you cannot make all of these suggestions work in yours. These hand-outs present the ideal scenario.

That said, a good outline of a bedtime routine you should aim for should look something like this:

2 hours before bed:

- **Big work out-** A tired body and a sensory organised system will get to sleep better.
- **Reduce stimuli-** Start to turn down lights and reduce environmental noise.
- **Start to reduce fluids-** Needing a wee or bed wetting is a very common sleep interruption.
- **A nice tummy calming snack or meal.**
- **Reduce sugars and additives you know are hyper reactive.**
- **Make the home/bedroom organised.**
- **Play structured games or more sedate games.**
- **Provide your child with lots of attention and positive reinforcement-** We want to fill up a child's need for attention in the build-up so they feel more content to leave us and sleep.

An hour and half before bed:

- **Bath time/blowing bubbles in the bath.**
- **Change for bed, brush teeth-** Changing clothes can be stimulating. Get this out of the way and afford time together for play after they are changed. That way you will avoid arguments and give a child time to adjust to bed time clothing.
- **Introduce cuing sounds-** Bed time story tape or programme, gentle/ familiar music (not white sound).
- **Tidy up** and packing away nearly complete.
- **A low stimuli environment** should be nearly achieved.

An hour before bed:

- **Calm joint activity-** Lots of attention now will reduce the need for it later.
- **Introduce sleeping scent.**
- **Engage in massage,** brushing and sensory box.
- **Use calm quiet structured commands and communication.**
- **Vibrating mat/toy**
- **Electric toothbrush**
- **Blowing bubbles or yoga with breath work**

Half an hour before bed

- **Big bed time routine starts here!**
- **Sensory night lights**
- **Cuddle, blanket wrap**
- **Night time song or story**
- **Turn on sensory sound**

- **Use structured and familiar commands** and avoid direct challenges, bribes and negotiations.
- **Make way to sleep space**
- **Set up night time stimuli** -scent, sound, visual, tactile-weighted items, blanket squeezes

Bed time

- **The only stimuli in the environment should be sensory regulating.**
- **Turn off or down other household noises.**
- **Place child back to bed securely and safely with minimal language.**
- **Draw attention to sensory stimuli.**
- **Encourage deep slow breaths, slow your own breathing.**

Other useful sensory information

Calming

- Blowing and sucking- blow bubbles in the bath with straws or tubing, drink a night time drink with a straw, play bubbles in evening work out
- Brushing, massage, joint compressions
- Deep and slow breathing will trigger sleep. Slowing your own breathing will naturally change a baby or child's breathing.
- Familiarity helps. Using familiar songs, stories and routines will help a child calm and regulate.
- Vibrating toys will calm. You can get vibrating mats for beds or for near beds.
- Using a social story of what to do when I wake can provide a child with strategies for bed time.
- Use monitors to avoid 'waking' a child when checking on them.
- Sensory deprivation is not always beneficial. This means complete darkness, silence and no movement can make it harder to sleep for a child with SPD. They may need just the right input.
- Repetitive stimuli

Alerting (hyper-active)

- TV and blue screen-see attached appendix.
- Spinning, going upside down
- Tickling
- Being upset (not always crying)
- Certain foods
- Light touch
- Stress and worry

Appendix 1

Screen Time:

Screen time can appear calming as a child can stay still and focused for a long time when they are engaged in TV and computer activities. This is due to higher brain functions shutting down. Rational thinking and organisation areas of the brain start to reduce. For a child with SPD this can have quite a dramatic effect on daily functioning. They may find it harder to release calming and regulating hormones. They may also find it harder to evaluate and make rational choices. It is possible they can become addicted and enter a fight or flight state to keep the TV on. They could be waking for the stimulation screen time provides. What they watch will also impact on emotional state. When watching the television, we respond emotionally and not logically. If our child is watching fighting or a highly emotional programme, they will adopt this state and respond to it. So the hype of a *Power Rangers* show will stay with them for around two hours. As they transition from an observing state to an active state they may well take the emotions induced by the programme with them into the next phase of their day.