

Healthy Sleep for Children



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A Parent Guide

Based on recommendations from CHEO, Anxiety Canada, and pediatric sleep research

Why Sleep Matters

Sleep helps children grow, learn, regulate their emotions, and manage stress and anxiety. Tired children may appear *more* active, irritable, impulsive, or tearful. Building strong sleep habits takes practice, but small consistent steps make a big difference.

How Much Sleep Does My Child Need?

Age	Total Sleep per Day
1–2 years	11–14 hours (incl. nap)
3–5 years	10–13 hours
6–12 years	9–12 hours
Teens	8–10 hours

Create a Predictable Bedtime Routine

A simple, consistent routine helps the brain shift into “sleep mode.”

Aim for 20–30 minutes, same order every night:

1. **Quiet play** → puzzles, colouring, reading together
2. **Bath / wash-up**
3. **Pyjamas + brush teeth**
4. **Reading time** (10–15 minutes)
5. **Goodnight routine** → hugs, short phrase (“I love you, see you in the morning”)

Tips:

- Do the exact same steps in the same order every night.
- Keep routines **calm, predictable, and screen-free**.
- Avoid anything stimulating (running, tickling, screens, arguments) 1 hour before bed.

Build a Sleep-Friendly Environment

- ✓ Cool, dark, quiet room
- ✓ White noise if helpful
- ✓ Limit stuffed animals to one or two
- ✓ Night light OK if anxiety is high (soft, warm light only)
- ✓ No screens 60 minutes before bed
- ✓ Remove the phone from the bedroom

If your child is anxious about sleeping alone, try:

- Leaving the door open
- A “comfort object” (teddy, blanket)
- A dim night light
- A parent’s written “goodnight note”

Bedtime Boundaries that Work

Children sleep better when expectations are clear and consistent.

Use a Bedtime Pass (age 3–10)

Give your child **one “pass”** they may use to get out of bed once (for a drink, extra hug, etc.)

After that, calmly walk them back to bed.

The Check-In Approach

If your child calls out or gets up:

- Return briefly, calmly, and neutrally
- Repeat the same phrase each time (“It’s bedtime. I’ll check on you again soon.”)
- Avoid long conversations or negotiating

Gradual Parental Withdrawal

Useful for children with anxiety or who need a parent present to fall asleep.

Start by sitting next to the bed, then:

- Every 2–3 nights move your chair a little farther: bedside → middle of room → near door → hallway
- Keep interactions minimal: “I’m here,” soft voice, no long discussions

This teaches the brain to “self-soothe” while still feeling safe.

When Anxiety Affects Sleep

Anxiety at night is common. The goal is not to remove all fear but to **help children build confidence and skills**.

a. Externalize the Worry

Ask: *"What is your worry telling you tonight?"*

Then respond: *"Thanks, worry. We're safe. We're going to sleep now."*

This helps the child view the worry as a *separate* voice, not truth.

The Worry Box / Worry Notebook

Before bedtime:

- Write or draw worries together
- Put them in a box
- Say: "We'll check these tomorrow if we need to."

This helps "schedule" worry time *away* from bedtime.

Laddering Fears

If the child fears sleeping alone:

- Step 1: Parent stays in room
 - Step 2: Parent sits farther away
 - Step 3: Parent stays at doorway
 - Step 4: Parent checks every 5 minutes from hallway
 - Step 5: Child falls asleep independently
- Move only when the child succeeds calmly for 2 nights.

Body-Calming Skills for Bedtime

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding (great for anxious kids)

Ask your child to name:

- 5 things they see
 - 4 things they hear
 - 3 things they feel/touch
 - 2 things they smell
 - 1 thing they taste or imagine tasting
- Grounds them in the present and reduces racing thoughts.

Balloon Breathing

"Pretend your belly is a balloon. Inhale and blow it up... exhale and deflate it slowly."

Repeat 5-10 times.

Starfish Breathing

Trace a hand: inhale going up each finger, exhale going down.

Daytime Habits that Improve Nighttime Sleep

- ✓ Regular exercise
- ✓ Morning sunlight exposure (10–15 min)
- ✓ No naps after 3pm (for young kids)
- ✓ Predictable meals and snacks
- ✓ No caffeine (chocolate, iced tea, energy drinks) after noon
- ✓ Keep bed for sleep only (not games or homework)

What to Do During Night Wakings

If your child wakes:

1. Go to them calmly
2. Keep lights dim
3. Use a short phrase: “It’s still sleep time.”
4. Avoid screens
5. Walk them back to bed if needed
6. Use the **same** strategy every time (consistency = faster learning)

When to Seek Help

Consider medical review if:

- Snoring, gasping, or pauses in breathing
- Nightly hours-long bedtime battles
- Severe anxiety or panic at bedtime
- Persistent insomnia (3+ months)
- Nightmares >2–3 times weekly
- Excessive daytime sleepiness

Quick Parent Checklist

- Same bedtime every night
- Calm, screen-free routine
- Predictable sleep environment
- Child falling asleep in their **own bed**
- Consistent responses to night wakings
- Anxiety strategies practiced **in daytime**, not only at night
- Gradual steps (not all at once)