

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives

## Sleep problems: why they happen and how to deal with them

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives sometimes seem to have difficulties going to bed, getting to sleep or staying asleep. This can be a difficult situation for carers and their families to cope with both practically and emotionally.



### What you might see

- A child with lots of tactics to delay bedtime
- A child who wanders around the house at night, raiding the fridge or switching on the TV
- A child who refuses to allow you to leave the bedroom
- A child who wants to sleep anywhere but their own bed
- A child who wakes repeatedly, sometimes upset and crying

### How it can feel

- Absolutely exhausting!
- That you are always feeling at the end of your tether
- Confusing - is the child deliberately keeping themselves awake, scared of going to sleep or simply have insomnia?
- Annoying and despairing - it affects not only you but everyone in the family, their work and education
- Draining - lack of sleep is affecting your immune system and you're getting every bug that's going
- Straining - there is a growing tension between you and the child



### What might be going on for the child?

- Often, such problems are the outward sign of their sense of insecurity, sometimes unconscious
- You can't sleep if your head's buzzing with thoughts. To go to sleep you need to be calm with lower arousal levels. These children naturally have higher levels of arousal and find it harder to wind down
- They are not practised at comforting themselves because they have not been comforted enough by others as young children
- They may have come from homes where bedtimes are non-existent or chaotic. They fell asleep where they were - in front of the TV. They're used to being up as long as the adults
- They've learnt that they must be always watchful for their own safety and sleep means dropping one's guard. They may fear being abandoned if they lose sight of the carer
- Rows often happened at night in their birth family. They needed to stay awake to try to intervene if necessary by creating a distraction
- Sexual abuse can be associated with night time, bed and the vulnerability of sleep
- Nightmares can sometimes make children so distressed that they fear sleep
- Bedtime may be seen by them as yet another battlefield for control so this, like everything else, must be controlled in order to try to feel safe

**A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here**

## Some suggestions that may help

- If the problem is essentially about insecurity, increasing the child's sense of being nurtured and safe is the fundamental solution
- All children who have experienced a difficult start to life need the security of bedtime routines used to prepare very young children eg milky drinks, warm bath, bedtime story etc
- Never use TV, DVD's, computer games etc as part of the calming down, bedtime routine. These stimulate the child's brain rather than reducing arousal levels. Ideally, no TV in their bedroom!
- Learn more from the child about their early experience of bedtimes. For children not used to going to sleep alone, try providing comforting objects; something of yours, large cuddly toy or obliging pet!
- Give clear boundaries about what they are and are not allowed to do at night
- If the child is upset, give calm reassurance with a brief cuddle or touch. A small drink or a night-light can help. Listen to them if they want to tell you what frightened them
- Do not talk about fantasy figures as if they are real e.g. saying a monster has gone or pretending to chase it away - they may fear it coming back!
- Accept and show you understand the difficulty and distress that not being able to sleep causes. Make tentative links for the child between this problem and their life experience
- Remind the child that it is a common problem to struggle with going to sleep or to feel anxious
- For children who have been locked in rooms in the past, make sure doors stay open or ajar
- For children who have had to scavenge at night, provide a small amount of food for reassurance
- For older children who like to stay up late, make their room an attractive retreat. Don't insist on a lights out time but do insist on quiet time
- If you and your partner have some unfinished disagreement to resolve, try to ensure it is done out of any possible hearing of the child. These children are often very sensitive to the least hint of tension in a relationship. It is the trigger to great anxiety

## Some suggestions if things still don't change

- Remember you can't make someone sleep. Concentrate on *bedtime* rather than *sleep* time. Encourage them to keep quiet so everyone else in the family has a chance of rest. Perhaps give them quiet amusements to while away the hours - books, tapes, paper and crayons (not the TV or electronic games)
- Leaving loving little messages in strategic places to greet your night wanderer can be caring, fun and effective, e.g. 'I'm sorry you can't sleep, help yourself to milk and biscuits.'
- Operating a shift system with your partner can be the only way to get some rest at least in the short-term
- Look after yourself - make sure you're taking time to relax and enjoy life when you can. What about naps in daytime or relaxation exercises?



It will take time for your child to gain new skills or change old habits. Help, encouragement and praise will help this happen. In the meantime it may help you to understand their sleeping difficulties as attempts to communicate their feelings.