

# Good sleep habits

**ALL children (and adults!) benefit from good sleep habits, also known as 'sleep hygiene.'**

Make sure you have these good habits in place before making any other changes.

## Good habits for sleep

**1. A calming bedtime routine:** Try to do the same things each night, choosing calm and enjoyable activities to help your child wind down. e.g. dinner, bath, quiet play or read, then into bed.

- Regular sleep and wake times (within 30 minutes)
- Avoid daytime naps (for children 5 and over).

**2. A calm, quiet sleep environment:** Your child's sleep environment should be cool, quiet, and relatively dark. It should be the same at bedtime as it is throughout the night. For example, the same lighting, and no music unless it will play all night.

**3. A media free bedroom:** Avoid watching electronic screens such as computer games, iPad and TV for at least one hour before bed.

**4. Get morning light:** Getting natural light during the morning, by opening the curtains or going outside, helps keep the body clock on the right track.

**5. Avoid caffeine from late afternoon:** Remember, caffeine is in chocolate bars as well as cola, tea and coffee.

**6. Encourage exercise (but not just before bed):** Avoid exciting, high-energy activities, just before bed - such as playing outside or running around.

## TIP: BE CONSISTENT

**Being consistent will increase your chances of success with improving your child's sleep patterns. It is important to stick to good sleep habits, even on weekends and holidays, otherwise your child's sleep patterns can get confused.**

# Normal sleep

## SLEEP is important for:

- The development of children's learning and behaviour
- Restoring physical and mental health
- Memory
- Maintaining our immune system so we don't get sick
- Brain development.

Children who do not get enough sleep may be at risk of under-performing, when compared to their peers.

## Science of sleep

Sleep-wake cycles (also called 'circadian rhythms') are regulated by light and dark, and take time to develop. They are stages of sleep that develop from about six weeks of age. By three to six months, most babies have a regular sleep-wake cycle where they sleep more at night and less during the day.

There are two types of sleep that we cycle through many times each night – known as *Deep sleep* and *Light sleep*.

These cycles last 45 – 60 minutes in children and 90 minutes in adults.

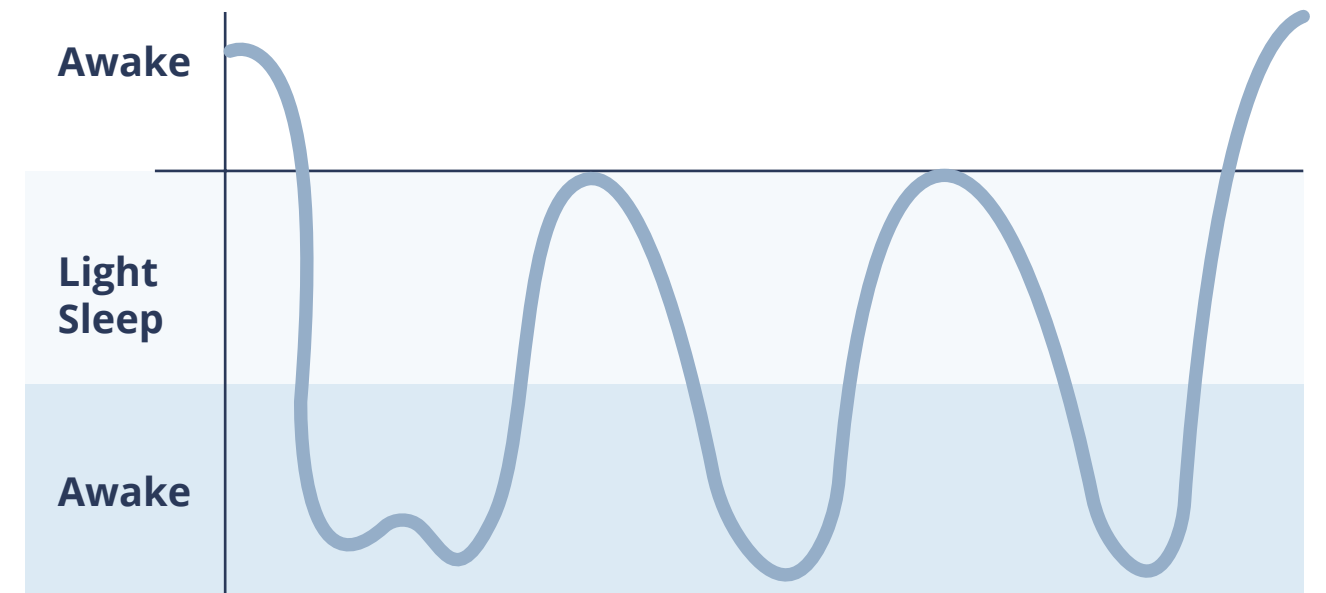
## DID YOU KNOW

### Waking up overnight is normal:

- **All children wake up during cycles of light sleep**
- **This is only a problem if your child cannot get back to sleep without your help**

## DID YOU KNOW

**Our brains make *Melatonin*, a sleep hormone, when it is dark. Having a bright light on or having light coming from an electronic screen can stop your child's brain making melatonin.**



### Light sleep is:

- A time when dreaming occurs, and
- Bodies become still

### Deep sleep is:

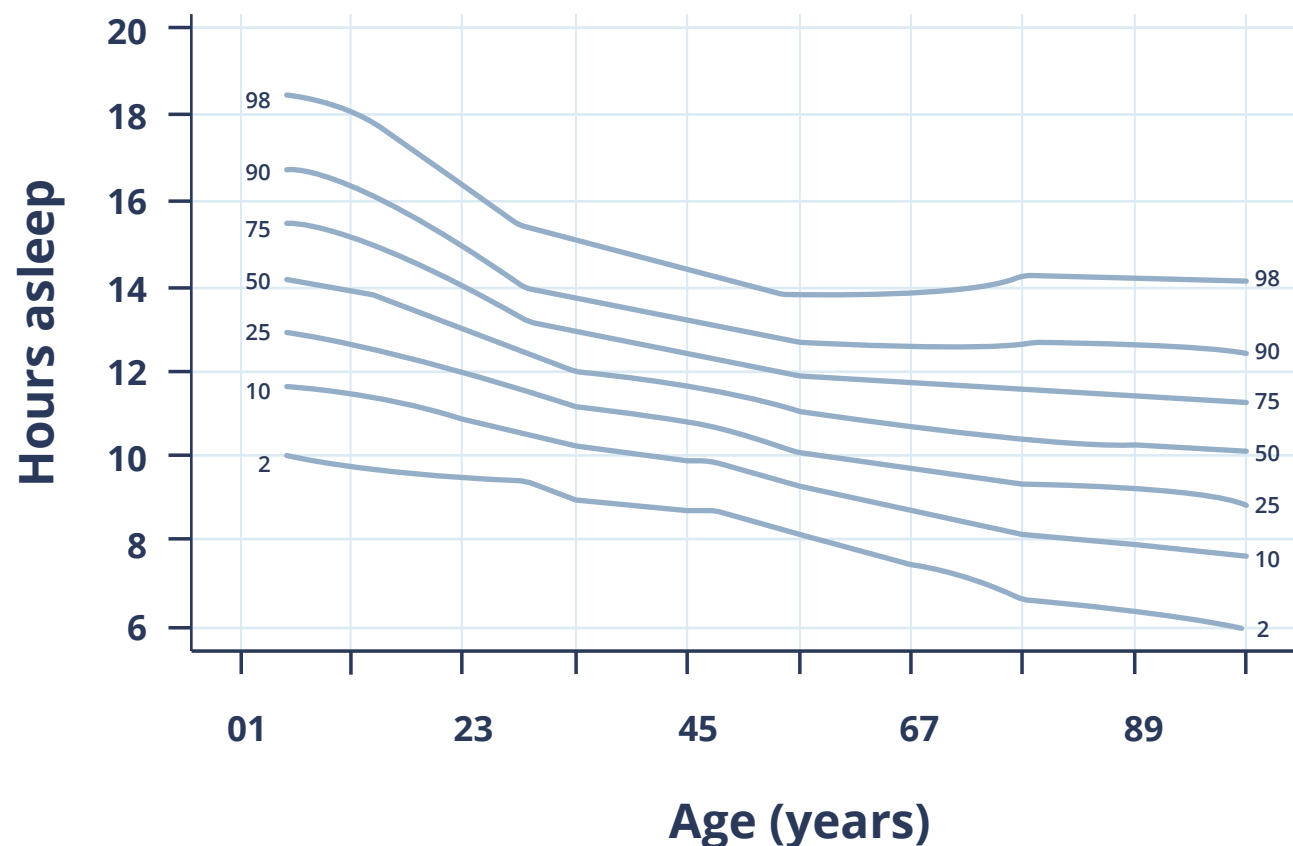
- Important for restoring the body
- A time when essential hormones for growth and development are released

## Normal sleep duration

The diagram below shows that normal Australian children vary greatly in how much they sleep each night.

- Most 3 year old children sleep around 12 hours each night, however some may happily sleep as little as 9 hours while others may need as much as 15 hours each night.
- Most children starting school sleep around 11 hours each night, but anywhere between 8 and 14 hours may be right for your child.

Studies have shown that it is likely to be the **timing** of going to bed and rising, as well as the quality of sleep overnight, which has more impact on how the child functions during the day, rather than the actual number of hours slept.



## Is my child getting enough sleep?

**If your child appears happy and healthy they are probably getting enough sleep for them, even if they sleep less than the average child their age.**

### Effects of lack of sleep

**Emotional:** Not enough sleep may cause your child to be moody and irritable. They may be frustrated or upset more easily.

**Behaviour:** Children who do not get enough sleep are more likely to have behaviour problems, such as not being able to concentrate, being restless or not doing what is asked of them.

**Thinking and Learning:** Not enough sleep may result in problems with paying attention, memory, decision making, reaction time, and creativity, which are all important in school.

# Helping your child relax: Visualisation

Teaching your child ways to relax can help them fall asleep at night. This handout discusses a method known as Visualisation. Other methods include the Worry Box, Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Deep Breathing.

Children who are 'worriers' often have a vivid imagination. By using their imagination to create a happy place when they are in bed may distract them from their worries, help them relax and fall asleep. Visualisation can help children relax by helping them to think about places or activities that make them feel happy and safe.

## Teaching your child deep breathing

Choose a book with pictures of a place your child can imagine (try to avoid dark or scary pictures). Talk about the picture and ask your child if they can see it in their mind. They can use their imagination to change the picture or add to it.

The more your child can learn to create pictures in their mind, the more it can help them relax.

**Talk to your child about how this technique will relax them, and how it'll get easier with daily practice.**

Your child may start to use this exercise in bed before they go to sleep. You can try gently reminding them they could try using it at bedtime, but don't tell them they have to do this otherwise they can end up getting worried if it doesn't work!

## TIP: RELAXATION STRATEGY

**With any relaxation technique, it is best to be taught when not stressed. Trying to teach a relaxation strategy when a child is very stressed can make their stress worse. Teach and practice relaxation techniques when you can both be calm and quiet together.**

# Helping your child relax: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Teaching your child a relaxation exercise - known as progressive muscle relaxation - can help them to relax and fall asleep at night.

Concentrating on relaxation is a distraction and can stop your child worrying. There are many physical feelings associated with worrying (e.g. breathing faster, sweating, heart racing). Relaxation can get rid of these physical feelings and make your child feel better able to cope.

## Teaching your child to relax their muscles

What to say to your child: You can say something like *“Sometimes when our minds are stressed, our bodies get tense. If we can learn to relax our tense bodies, then our minds may relax too. But we need to practice what it feels like to have tense and relaxed muscles.”*

On the next page there is simple relaxation exercise that you can do with your child to help them learn how to relax their muscles.

This exercise can be a nice way to help your child wind down during quiet time in your pre-bedtime routine. They might be able to use it later in the night to help them get to sleep at the start of the night, or to get back to sleep if they wake overnight.

## A simple relaxation scenario - Step by step

Have your child lie down on their back somewhere quiet with their legs bent at the knees so their feet are flat on the ground.

- Say, *“Close your eyes and pretend you are at the beach, lying on the sand.”* Ask your child to pretend they hear the water lapping against the shore.
- Next, ask your child to imagine that it’s a beautiful, sunny day. The sun feels warm against their skin. The sand is warm underneath their body.
- Have your child take a few deep breaths as they *“watch the waves go in and out”*.
- Now ask your child to squeeze the sand between their **toes**--squeeze hard! *Breathe in, hold (count 5 seconds), breathe out, and relax.*
- Now squeeze your **legs**! *“Feel how tight that muscle is”*. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Now ask them to tighten their **bottom**. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Now squeeze your **tummy**. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Then your **chest**. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- And then the **face**. Sometimes children don’t know how to tense up their face. You may need to say something like: “Squeeze your eyes and mouth tight!” *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Then ask them to squeeze their **shoulders and neck**. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Now the **hands and arms**. Remind them to “squeeze sand in-between their fingers”. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Finally, have your child squeeze their **whole body**. *Breathe in, hold, breathe out and relax.*
- Ask them to take a few more deep breaths.
- Remind them to feel the warm sun and sand. Hear the water against the shore.
- If you’re not wanting your child to go to sleep now, ask them to open their eyes.

# Putting worries to bed

It is not unusual for children to have worries or fears at night time. Helping them overcome their night time worries teaches them skills they can use in other areas.

This handout talks about some creative strategies that can help your child feel like the worries are being taken care of so they no longer need to be in their mind. Planning this ahead of time and talking about it during the day, when they feel confident, will help them feel confident at night.

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## A worry box

This is a popular strategy. Your child draws or writes about their worries during the day, and thinks or talks about possible solutions.

Before bedtime, put the drawings in the box, and leave them there to think about tomorrow.

For some children this helps their particular worry go away completely.

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## Monster Traps

Many children and parents have found it helpful to make a monster trap.

This can be talked about and set up during the day and is a way of making the child feel safe. Be creative with it.

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## A guardian dragon or guardian fairy

A special 'fairy' or protective 'dragon' is a way of using a child's imagination in a helpful way.

The fairy or dragon looks after them and takes away their worries.



# Helping Your Child Relax: Deep Breathing

Teaching your child ways to relax can help them fall asleep at night. This hand-out discusses a method known as Deep Breathing. Other methods include the Worry Box, Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Visualisation.

Deep breathing can help children relax. Taking deep, slow, breaths gives our body the message to relax.

## Teaching your child deep breathing

What to say to your child: You can say something like *“Sometimes when our minds are stressed, our bodies get tense. If we can learn to relax our tense bodies, then our minds may relax too. But we need to practice how to breathe deeply.”*

First, ask your child to relax their shoulders.

Ask them to breathe IN for four slow counts.

Say *“IN, 2, 3, 4”*

Now HOLD the breath for four counts.

Say *“HOLD, 2, 3, 4”*

Ask them to breathe OUT for four counts.

Say *“OUT, 2, 3, 4”*

Now HOLD the breath for four counts.

Say *“HOLD, 2, 3, 4”*

Repeat up to four times.

Repeat *“IN, 2, 3, 4”* ...

Talk to your child about how this will relax them, and how it'll get easier with daily practice.

Your child may start to use this exercise in bed before they go to sleep. You can try gently reminding them they could try using it at bedtime, but don't tell them they have to do this otherwise they can end up getting worried if it doesn't work!

**You can teach your child to breathe out**

**slowly using bubble-blowing**

## Relaxation Strategy

**With any relaxation technique, it is best to be taught when not stressed. Trying to teach a relaxation strategy when a child is very stressed can make their stress worse. Teach and practice relaxation techniques when you can both be calm and quiet together.**

# Controlled comforting or checking method

*Controlled Comforting or the Checking Method* (for older children) is a strategy for dealing with persistent settling and waking problems in children. It involves briefly comforting, settling and then leaving your child for short time periods so your child learns to go to sleep on their own. The purpose of this is to reassure your child you are still there and to reassure yourself that your child is OK. This can be particularly helpful for children who are anxious about going to sleep.

## About the method

The idea with the controlled comforting/checking method is to give your child the opportunity to learn to go to sleep by themselves. If your child gets upset when you leave their bedroom,

**wait a short time before you go back to them,**

**gradually increase the time you spend outside the**

**bedroom before going to check on them.**

In this way, they are also learning that you are not far away and will return.

## Before you start

Parents dealing with sleep and settling problems can become very tired and stressed, particularly if they're losing sleep themselves. Controlled comforting is sometimes tried by parents who feel overwhelmed, or whose wellbeing is suffering.

Before you start, make sure your child is getting lots of attention, time and affection during the day.

## Doing controlled comforting and checking method

Some important tips:

1. The method takes 3-14 days to work.
2. Turn baby monitors down or even off! Make sure you can still hear your child without a monitor.
3. Don't wait outside your child's bedroom. Go into another room and distract yourself – make a cup of tea or turn on the TV. Only go back to check on your child when the set time is up.
4. Talk to your partner first to make sure that you both agree with what's going on. Work out what role each of you will play – for example, helping with resettling or timing the intervals.
5. Consider taking turns each night.
6. Avoid important commitments for the first few days after you start controlled comforting. You need to be able to see it through without a major change to your child's routine.

## TIPS: HOW MUCH TIME WILL I WAIT?

**Set your own intervals of time based on how long you think you can manage.**

**For some children, frequent checking is good – say 2, then 4, 6, 8, then 10 minutes. For others, less checking is best – say 5, then 10, 15, 20, then 25 minutes.**



## Step by step

First, establish a consistent and positive bedtime routine, see the *Good Sleep Habits* handout for ideas.

Also, decide on the waiting times between checks that are best for you and your child.

- When it is time, settle your child in bed, say “goodnight” and leave the room before your child is asleep. Promise to come back and check on them.
- Stay out of the bedroom and give your child a chance to settle by herself. Ignore grizzling.
- If your child starts to really cry, wait the first time interval you have decided (e.g. 2 minutes) before *Checking your child* (see below).
- After leaving the room, again give your child a chance to settle by herself.
- If they again start to cry, wait for the second time interval (e.g. 4 minutes) before going to check your child.
- Continue to check on your child as long as they are upset, gradually stretching the interval times.

### Checking your child:

*The checks should be brief (1 minute) and boring!*

1. **Soothe your child by talking or patting them.** Try to soothe your child without picking them up if you can.
2. **Do this for one minute**, or until there quiet, depending on your preference.
3. **Keep an eye on their nappy.** If it's dirty, change under low light and with minimal fuss.
4. **If your child tries to play with you**, calmly tell them it is sleep time and say you will be back to check on them.
5. **As soon as there quiet** (or after one minute), but *before your child is asleep*, leave the room.

**When your child wakes overnight:** Follow the same routine

**Use this strategy for any daytime sleeps too:** This will lead to less confusion for you and child. If your child wakes up from a day sleep after less than an hour, try to re-settle them for another 15-20 minutes, again using controlled comforting. If, after that time, your child hasn't gone back to sleep, its fine to get them out of bed and try again later.

**If your child comes out of the room:** Take them straight back to their room, say “*goodnight*”, and leave. Ignore any requests for food, drink or talking. You may have to take your child back many times before they get the message.

## TIPS: REWARDS

**For children over three it can be helpful to reward them in the morning for being able to stay in their own bed (see the Rewards handout for ideas).**

## Frequently asked question

Putting a sleep behaviour strategy into practice doesn't always go smoothly. Here are some common questions about the controlled comforting / checking method and practical tips for how to deal with them.

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## Concerns about your child


**Is controlled comforting harmful?** Despite concerns about potential harms to the child, no studies published in peer-reviewed journals have shown any psychological or physical harm from using controlled comforting.

**What if my baby vomits?** Some babies tend to vomit more often than others, and about one in five might vomit during controlled comforting. If this happens it can be upsetting for baby and you. Try to calmly clean up any vomit from the bed and put a fitted mattress protector over the sheet. It's best to avoid making a big fuss, turning on lights, or completely changing the baby unless absolutely necessary – otherwise, some babies can learn to vomit each time they are put into the cot.

**What if you've had enough?** If you're too tired, or feeling too distressed or upset, pick up your baby, calm them in any way you wish – for example, with a small drink or a cuddle – and try again next time.

**What if my baby is unwell?** If your baby is unwell, you should stop controlled comforting start again when they feel better. If they have a slight runny nose and cough but no fever, you can still use controlled comforting.

**What if my baby is in pain?** Many parents are concerned about teething causing pain. If you pick up your baby and he settles almost immediately, it's very unlikely he was in pain – he just wanted to be picked up. You can give paracetamol (Panadol) if you're concerned. Paracetamol takes about 20 minutes to work, so babies who settle after that might have been in pain. If you have persistent concerns about your baby being in pain, talk to your doctor.



**In fact, recent research has shown that babies who have undergone controlled comforting are more likely to sleep better in the short term, and are as well-adjusted as their peers in terms of behaviour and sleep in the long term. A recent study also found that parents who used these techniques with their babies reported fewer symptoms of depression in both the short and long term than parents who didn't.**

## What if controlled comforting or checking method isn't working?

There can be several reasons why a sleep program doesn't appear to be working.

**Are you using the strategy correctly?** To check, re-read the steps described here. Is there anything you're not doing, or could do differently? Perhaps check with a professional who understands the use of this strategy.

**Are you returning to your child too soon?** Are you following the time intervals? Are you using a clock? Have you got something you can do to help you cope during the intervals?

**Are you going in when your baby is only grizzling, not crying?** Many babies grizzle when drifting off to sleep and by going in you might be stopping your baby from falling asleep. Only return when your baby is crying.

**Do you really want to carry through with this?** Is the goal of uninterrupted sleep worth it for you and your child? If you're convinced that learning to sleep independently through the night is in your child's best interests, it's easier to find the motivation to carry on through the few nights needed to help them adjust to the change. If not, consider using a different strategy such as Camping Out or having a break and trying again when your child is a bit older.

**Are the time intervals right for your child?** Some children calm down when a parent enters the room. Other children get more upset. If your child is getting more upset, lengthen the time intervals to 5, 10 and 15 minutes. This way your child has more time to go to sleep by themselves, and less time to get upset by your return.

**Is your support network actually supportive?** Not everyone agrees with controlled comforting. Disapproving family or friends are one thing, but if your partner or other close support people aren't in agreement, it will be difficult to carry through with the strategy. It's best if at least the people in your household can agree on a consistent approach.

## TIP: THE EXTINCTION BURST

**After a few good nights or even weeks, your child may suddenly start doing the old behaviour, and more often or more strongly than before.**

**This is known as an extinction burst, and while discouraging, it is temporary.**

**If you can keep going with your strategy, the behaviours should stop after a few days.**

## When the controlled comforting / checking method seems too hard

1. Consider breaking it down into a series of steps. For example, you could pat your child until they're quiet and put them down/leave the room with them semi-asleep for a week. Then for the next week, put your child into their cot/bed fully awake
2. Try using the method only at the start of the night, when it's likely to be more successful.
3. Ask your partner to manage the controlled comforting or checking method (if he or she agrees to).
4. Use camping out as an alternative (see the camping out handout for how to do this).

# Bedtime Fading

If your child is taking more than an hour to fall asleep after your chosen bedtime, you may find that trying to put your child to bed at the earlier time results in bedtime struggles. For some children it is best to gradually make their bedtime earlier, starting at the time they are naturally tired and ready for bed.

## Setting a suitable bedtime

**Decide on a suitable bedtime for your child:** This will be different for each family and child, considering how much sleep they need, when they need to be up in the morning, and other family needs such as settling all children at a similar time. Ideally, your child should fall asleep around this time every night, to help set your child’s internal body clock. [handout](#) for more information.

## Bedtime fading

- A good strategy for changing your child’s bedtime is **Bedtime Fading**:
1. Work out when your child is naturally falling asleep and set this as the **temporary bedtime**. For example, if you want your child to go to bed at 8:30pm, but they usually do not fall asleep until 10:00pm, choose 10:00pm as the temporary bedtime.
  2. Once they are falling asleep easily and quickly at this temporary bedtime then make their bedtime earlier by 15 minutes.
  3. When they are falling asleep easily and quickly at this new bedtime then bring it forward by another 15 minutes.
  4. Keep on doing this until you have reached the bedtime you want (for example, 8:30pm).

Be patient. If you move bedtime too quickly, your child may be unable to fall asleep.

Sam’s Bedtime						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
		10:00	10:00	9:45	9:45	9:45
9:30	9:30	9:15	9:15	9:15	9:15	9:00
9:00	8:45	8:45	8:30			

## Get morning light

Morning light also helps set an earlier bedtime and helps keep the body clock on the right track. Open the curtains in the bedroom, eat breakfast in a sunny area, or spend some time outdoors.

## Be consistent

Keep trying for a number of nights, and encourage others caring for your child to use the same strategies. Being consistent will increase your chances of success with improving your child’s sleep patterns.