Bedtime routines and sleep for children who have additional needs

Helping you find the right bedtime routine and sleep environment for your child.

Information accurate as at
30 June 2025

Better Start Southend
our children our community our future

early years alliance

COMMUNITY FUND

Introduction

If you have a child with additional needs who has sleep issues, bedtime can be really tricky. But often, persevering and trying different approaches can eventually bring success. Finding the right bedtime routine for your family and child, using calming activities, visual clues, and relaxation techniques can be incredibly beneficial.

Children benefit from bedtime routines because they help them settle down and fall asleep more easily, which leads to better quality sleep and reduced nighttime awakenings, and this in turn improves children's mood, emotional regulation, and overall health and well-being.

A bedtime routine can be particularly helpful for children with SEND as it provides predictability, helps with relaxation, and promotes a sense of safety and security, which can be particularly beneficial for children who may struggle with transitions in the day or who have sensory sensitivities.

Parent/carers often ask:

- How do I establish a good bedtime routine for my child?
- How do I help my child to sleep well?

A common challenge

For some children with specific disabilities—particularly those who are neurodivergent - bedtime routines and sleep can consistently be a challenge. While it's not universally the case for *all* neurodivergent children, sleep difficulties are **very common** and often **ongoing** due to a range of neurological, sensory, and behavioural factors.

For example:

- **Autistic children** often struggle with sleep due to sensory sensitivities, anxiety, or differences in melatonin production.
- Children with **ADHD** may have difficulty winding down, regulating their internal body clock, or staying asleep through the night.
- Those with **PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance)** or anxiety-related disorders may resist the structure of a bedtime routine due to the demand element it represents.
- Children with **trauma-related attachment disorders** may feel unsafe when separated or in the dark, making sleep particularly challenging.

But persevering and trying different approaches can eventually bring success. Finding the right bedtime routine for your family and child, using calming activities, visual clues, and relaxation techniques can be incredibly beneficial.

Most children benefit from bedtime routines because they help them settle down and fall asleep more easily, which leads to better quality sleep and reduced nighttime awakenings, and this in turn improves children's mood, emotional regulation, and overall health and well-being.

A bedtime routine can be particularly helpful for children with SEND as it provides predictability, helps with relaxation, and promotes a sense of safety and security, which can be particularly beneficial for children who may struggle with transitions in the day or who have sensory sensitivities.

Top tips and ideas

You may want to use a **'now and next board'** or other visual clues to help your child understand the routine and what is coming next.

Try to ensure that your child is in a **bedtime routine.**

Avoid any screens in the hour leading up to bedtime - this includes mobile phones, TV and computer screens. Consider using the 'Night mode' which will dim the screen and is less stimulating before bedtime

Avoid anything sugar loaded before bedtime.

An example 'now and next board'

Review your child's bedroom and assess whether it is a good environment to promote sleep:

- **Light levels:** A dark room helps regulate sleep-wake cycles by promoting the production of melatonin, a hormone that makes you feel sleepy. Consider using blackout curtains or blinds to block out any light, especially during the summer months. A soft nightlight can be helpful for children who are scared of the dark or just prefer some light at night. But avoid blue light from screens before bed, as it can interfere with melatonin production and sleep rhythms.
- **Quiet:** A quiet room is crucial for good sleep. Minimize distractions like TV or noise from other rooms. If needed, white noise machines can help mask distracting noises and promote a sense of calm. If you have an Alexa or something similar there are a number of sounds or lullabies you can access for free, that help with sleep.
- **Temperature:** the ideal room temperature for sleep is around 18-19°C (65-67°F). A room that is too hot or too cold can disrupt sleep.

Top tips and ideas (continued)

- **Tidiness:** A tidy bedroom can promote a more relaxing environment. Store away toys and belongings at night. Avoid having electronic devices, schoolwork, or other distracting items visible.
- **Sensory needs:** Consider your child's sensory needs, you will know best what your child might like - They might prefer a weighted blanket or specific textures in their bedding. They may like a calming scent like lavender in the room. They might require a specific routine before they are able to sleep.

Getting ready:

- Get the bedroom ready - dim the lights, shut the curtains, and ensure the bedroom is tidy and free from distractions like lots of toys or very strong smells.
- Give your child a warm bath to relax them.
- Read a story or put on some soft music.
- A gentle massage might work for some children *(see video link below for techniques)*

Consistency is Key:

- Aim for a consistent bedtime each night to help regulate your child's sleep cycle. And wake them at the same time in the morning if you can.
- The same routine each night helps the child understand what is coming next and be ready for sleep.

Explore your child's sleep issues: If your child is struggling with going to sleep or staying asleep, then record what is happening at night by using a sleep diary. Here are some useful tips on compiling one:
https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/early-parenting/sleep/sleep-diary-child/

Getting help:
Lots of advice and tips are available through **The Sleep Charity** and other support organisations, through the Southend Local Offer on the Live Well site, and through the NHS – links to all of these are listed below.

If the tips on the different websites don't help you, and the problems persist - speak to your health visitor or GP to explore any underlying medical or other issues which may be affecting their sleep. Share the sleep diary you have made, so that they can see what is happening for your child at night.

Useful Videos

‘Hands on’ technique for regulation

Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust
www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuPZx7XIxyw

Useful sources of information and support

The Sleep Charity is a good source of information and has a useful downloadable information sheet on sleep advice for children with SEND: https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/children-with-send/

Contact has a downloadable booklet on helping your child sleep for parents of disabled children: https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Helping-your-child-sleep.pdf

The National Autistic Society has a guide on sleep for parents of autistic children: https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/sleep/parents

There are lots of websites that offer good sleep tips, here are a few that may be useful:

- https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/children/children-with-send/
- https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/national-sleep-helpline/
- https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/help-disabled-child-breathing-exercises
- https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/your-family/special-educational-needs/sleep-advice-for-parents-with-disabled-children
- https://sunshine-support.org/how-can-we-help-sen-children-with-sleep-problems/
- https://www.livewellsouthend.com/school-nursing/sleep-advice-children-special-educational-needs-disability-send
- https://www.nhs.uk/baby/health/sleep-and-young-children/
- https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/help-disabled-child-sleep

Sleep Diary
We've created a useful Sleep Diary that you can download from the A Better Start website here: https://abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Sleep-diary.docx

Jargon Buster

Here are some terms or abbreviations you might come across:

Circadian Rhythm
The body's approximately 24-hour 'clock' that helps coordinate the timing of a wide range of physical and mental functions, including sleep.

Blue Light
A type of light with a specific wavelength that is part of the visible light spectrum. It is often emitted by many LEDs and electronic devices and has a greater effect on circadian rhythm than other light.

Melatonin
A hormone that makes you feel sleepy.

Sleep Disorder
A condition that disrupts normal sleep patterns, affecting the quality, timing, or amount of sleep.

ASD/C
Autistic Spectrum Disorder / Condition

Neurodiversity
Neurodiversity is a framework for understanding how people think, learn, and behave. Most people are neurotypical, meaning their brains function as expected by society. However, it's estimated that around 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent. Neurodiversity covers a wide range of conditions, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, and autism.

City Family

City Family is a local organisation that takes the good practice from A Better Start Southend (ABSS) and weaves it into their support services for local families. They connect parents and carers to support, services, and community networks, making family life a little easier. Whether you need advice, activities, or access to more specialist support, they can help you. Whatever your journey, you're not alone.

If you have any questions or concerns around family services in Southend, or need support, please contact City Family's Information and Guidance Service where their Navigators will be able to help you.

- **Call:** 01702 844188
- **WhatsApp/Live Chat:** 07507 242398
- **Email:** yfsouthend@cityfamily.org.uk
- **or visit** www.cityfamily.org.uk

You can also visit City Family's Service Map to explore services available to families across the city of Southend. www.cityfamily.org.uk/search/

Visit City Family's website for more information
www.cityfamily.org

A Better Start Southend

A Better Start Southend (ABSS) was at the heart of early years support for families in Southend from 2015 until March 2025.

ABSS delivered services that helped families:

- improve how they communicate with their little ones
- build social and emotional skills
- live healthier lives

.

As part of the legacy from ABSS, local partner organisations and parents worked closely with ABSS to assemble a range of resource packs for families and for practitioners who support families. This Information Sheet forms part of those resources.

Learn more about the ABSS Family Resource Packs
www.abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/family-resources