



# SLEEP MATTERS

With Lucy Wolfe

## Supporting our adolescent children to sleep better and thrive

Presented by Lucy Wolfe, H.Dip RM, MA, Responsive Sleep Practitioner, Relationship Mentor, Author of The Baby Sleep Solution, and All About The Baby Sleep Solution, Post-Graduate Researcher (PhD) and Mum of Four children





## Becoming a teenager

- The crucial process in the teenage years is about your adolescent starting to become their own person. It is about becoming more independent; it is about taking responsibility for themselves and their own actions; it is about finding the emotional safety to be true to themselves: to be real and authentic.
- As parents, our continued task is to provide a psychologically safe, warm responsive, attentive family culture with unconditional loving responses, boundaries and understanding whilst we host this amazing process, that is not without challenges.
- The challenges are primarily concerned with our children growing up, becoming more independent, separating from us as their parents, being more influenced by their peers than by us, and finding their own particular way of open and real expression to the several aspects of themselves-from socially, emotionally, intellectually, creatively, and so on.
- Another of the co-occurring challenges is helping and supporting and guiding them to get enough sleep, to underscore the importance of sleep, so they can be inspired to be optimally rested to navigate the typical challenges of adolescence with greater ease.



## All about sleep

- Your young person's sleep is a process of development, with brain re-organisation, and psychological maturation that extends into their 20's. Much of this transformative construction occurs during sleep. Sleep enables emotions to be processed, information to be learned, memories encoded, muscle repair and growth, alongside many other systems in the body completing essential tasks- all through the medium of sleep.
- The magnitude of these changes mean that adolescents have a deep and somewhat urgent need for sleep. Helping them to understand the significance and the implication of increased sleep, with your support and guidance, can help promote a sleep positive culture within your household.



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## What's going on?

**Sleep can be challenging, for some from infancy and early childhood, and for others as a new issue evolving with their child. As we head into the teenage years please note:**

- Sleep-wake behaviour changes in the age cohort are the product of changing sleep mechanisms and evolving psychosocial factors.
- A hallmark change is bedtime getting later, co-occurring with parent set bedtimes possibly giving way to more independent, self-directed activities and bedtime
- Alongside this, sleep is in competition with social aspects and demands: study, training, part-time work, commitments, wanting to spend time on electronic/social media for example all contribute to a later onset of sleep and or/ difficulties maintaining sleep, getting up in the morning.



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**Sleep is multi-factorial: physiological, psychological, environmental, behavioural as well as socio-cultural. Biologically, there are the two processes that regulate sleep: The homeostatic sleep drive, and the circadian system.**

- The **homeostatic sleep drive** is pressure that builds the longer you are awake, and then releases when you sleep. Too little can make it hard to get to sleep and too much can have the same impact.
- The **circadian system** is a biological pacemaker that controls the circadian rhythm. This internal clock sends messages through the 24-hour day influencing our sleep-wake patterns and many other biological processes. It is influenced by internal aspects and external cues such as light/dark, eating schedules, exercise and up and down-time.
- Naturally occurring, as bedtime approaches, the body temperature begins to go down, and levels of the sleep-inducing chemical melatonin rises in preparation for sleep. **The alignment of these two processes predicts maintenance of wakefulness and alertness during the daytime and maintenance of sleep at night.** The ideal balance between systems is challenged during adolescence as both processes show developmental changes. Behavioural and social demands further alter the balance.



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## How much sleep?

For this cohort, 8-8.5h is considered adequate and 9-10 h is optimal, acknowledging that every individual will have a unique sleep need. The key is to support their sleep profile to be the best that it can be and they can function optimally.

### Too little sleep may lead to

- Moodiness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lethargy
- Short temper
- Weight gain
- Low immune strength
- Long term health issues
- Relationship conflict depression and anxiety

### Just the right amount of sleep leads to

- Positive outlook
- Sharp focus
- Good energy
- Longer fuse
- Weight normalises
- Stronger immune response
- Healthier heart, deeper connection/communication and lesser depression/anxiety tendencies

Focus on the positive aspects of sleep and together with your child discuss the importance and value of sleep, explore this as a topic and gather their unique insights. Identify key areas of interest to help motivate them: academia, sports, image, and link that with the importance of sleep.



## Examining the relationships that influence sleep

- As well as biological factors and their emerging chronotype that influences their sleep patterns, their ongoing understanding and relationship with sleep, with their parent, and with themselves and their peers, has a significant impact.
- The relationship with the sleep environment, their activity, their food and drink choices; and the example that we are showing them too; all can influence their sleep tendency. At this age now, peers have a significant influence on all aspects of self and fear of missing out stimulates an inherent need to belong at any cost.



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**Start with the wake time and reverse engineer bedtime.**

- Underscore regularity and the importance of the body clock alignment as a primary influence on sleeping patterns.
- Encourage them to commit to the same wake and bedtime every day-7 days a week
- Variation ideally not more than 1-2 hours at weekends. Avoid entirely if falling asleep and maintaining sleep continues to be a problematic. Allocate 3-4 weeks to implement this and see how it may shape their sleep profile- keep a sleep diary to understand this more
- As you navigate this topic, agree and commit to a suitable bedtime. Considerations will include
  - ✓ When they feel tired
  - ✓ What time they must be awake at
- ✓ How much sleep they require. Do a backward calculation from the necessary wake time and their proposed sleep need
- Use morning light and movement to help stimulate the waking part of the brain and make space for enough awake time to allow sleep to occur at bedtime with greater ease.
- For those who struggle to wake up, use a morning light alarm clock and make space/time in the morning for a calm waking and getting ready to get out the door time.
- Encourage outside activity fresh air, regular movement breaks throughout the day, natural light and green space exposure, all known to help promote sleep.



## Prioritize the sleep environment

### **Cool, comfortable, dark and without distraction.**

- Needs to be the coolest room in the house at bedtime to help initiate sleep hormone production
- Suggested to use blackout blinds and curtains and avoid hall and bathroom lights and if using a night light, not in the eyeline in the room
- Consider an eye mask to help further
- Eliminate loud or sudden noises with white noise or ear plugs as a barrier to unwanted disturbances
- Unclutter the room; clean, air and vacuum regularly
- Avoid using the bed for anything other than sleep- when possible. Create a distinction between the study/hang out area and the place for sleep



## Evaluate the relationship with food and drink

- Support them to eat and drink at the same times every day, regularity helps promote the external cues and signals that help to support better sleep. Try to encourage breakfast to regulate blood sugar levels and kick start the metabolism
- Be mindful that caffeinated products, alcohol, high sugar, refined carbohydrates and nicotine can act a stimulant and deeply impact our sleep onset, maintenance and sleep totals
- Caffeine for example takes 3-7 hours to eliminate from the system and longer depending on intake levels- avoid entirely if possible and specifically in the afternoon and evening setting- be mindful of over-the-counter medication that contains caffeine as well as popular energy drinks
- Avoid heavy meals 2-3 hours before bedtime, but don't go to bed hungry consider a sleep promoting light supper. Banana, wholemeal, oatmeal, dairy, honey, some nuts and seeds all have sleep promoting qualities.



## Boundary the relationship with electronic media and screens

- Consider no electronic media/screens in the bedroom or agreed to be turned off by a certain time
- In general, suggested to avoid TV and electronics an hour or more before bedtime- set a loving boundary about this –open conversations are required and parents setting an example too can be helpful
- When we create digital boundary, it is sensible to replace this activity with another activity that serves to calm and relax- parent time and connection is nearly always welcome and certainly encouraged
- Preparing for bedtime ideally commences 1-1.5 hours before your set bedtime/allocated lights out- allowing for 30m-1 hour of relaxing activity outside of the bedroom and 20-30 minutes in the bedroom itself before lights out.
- Screen do's: watch a movie (passive) on television programme
- Read with red colour/low lighting
- Don't: play video games( interactive) watch a tv show on laptop (close) read with bright lights



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**Suggested calming activities- 30m-1 hour of so before the bedtime routine begins- can be done solo or with the parent (s) and other family members, dim lights, begin to quiet down. No new learning in this time frame.**

- Draw/journal, read, yoga, meditation
- Listening to music, watching television
- Wordsearch, crosswords
- Drawing, colouring, needlework
- Puzzles, jigsaws
- Family time

It is the deep-seated need for each child to feel seen, heard, loved, safe, secure and belonging to the holding world of family. It is important that we are creating a loving, attentive, warm, responsive family culture that honours your child's individuality. Children of all ages flourish with their parents loving presence- ensure that we are spending lots of one to one, connected time with each of our children-nothing to do with sleep- with plenty of dialogue, eye contact, meaningful presence and physical touch. Practise active listening and being wholly available to them and try your best not to be distracted by modern life such as phones when we are with them.



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## **The bedtime routine**

Ideally in the bedroom where your child will sleep following preparation such as teeth, makeup removal, having a bath or shower; 20-30 minutes before they anticipate “lights out”

Encourage the same ritual each night either with or without parent based on what fits your family; limit the bedroom activities to 3-6 items e.g. chats, reading, relaxation/ breathing exercises, visualisations, meditation.

e.g. bath, shower, teeth, pyjamas, journal, last chat with parent, read, lights out



## The relationship to thoughts, feelings, worry and concerns that may arise

- Reports of stress and anxiety make up more than 40% of the sleep issues experienced. Unwanted thoughts and feelings flood the mind increasing adrenaline encouraging a fight , flight or freeze mode that makes going and/or returning to sleep very challenging. The more each individual tries not to worry or think about certain things, the harder we try to go to sleep: the more elusive it becomes, creating a cycle of tension, psychologically between the person and their sleep.
- To address a cycle of tension, it is necessary first to establish the root of the issues and to see the meaning and metaphor of what is showing up. It may be helpful to seek professional guidance to help your young person and you, to better understand what is causing the anxiety in the first place. Uncovering the true source of what lies hidden, increases understanding and will help them further on their journey to realness and authenticity. All behaviour makes sense and represents an action for self.
- Journaling has shown to be a helpful way to reflect and work through what is arising for the individual. Incidentally, keeping a sleep diary also can help you identify vulnerable areas too.



## Breathing Awareness Exercise

- Lie down on your back with your arms relaxed by your sides. Take a few seconds to get comfortable.
- Bring your awareness to your breathing. Can you feel your breath coming in and going out?
- There's no right way to breathe. Just relax and breathe normally.
- Try to imagine the air is coming from far away, and you blow it out to a distant place.
- You might also say the words 'in' and 'out' in your mind to match your breathing. Or perhaps think of the word 'relax' on each out breath.
- Concentrate on your chest rising and falling – can you feel it? few minutes or until you feel too sleepy to continue.
- Can you taste or smell the air as you breathe in? Is it cool or warm?
- Your mind will probably wander at some point, and thoughts may arise.
- Don't worry if you have thoughts. Acknowledge them, and then gently bring your focus back to your breathing.
- As you continue breathing, feel your body gently sink into your mattress little by little.
- You can do this breathing exercise any time you feel the need to during the day. Just 5 minutes can help, but you might like to build up to 20 minutes over time.
- And if you do it in bed, you can either do it for a few minutes or until you feel too sleepy to continue.



## Body Scan Exercise

- Lie down and get yourself comfortable.
- Imagine your mind leaving your head, and travelling through your body to one of your feet.
- How does your foot feel? Is it relaxed, tense or sore? Is it hot or cold?
- Don't make any judgments on how it feels – simply scan and observe how you feel.
- Imagine your toe and foot muscles tightening, and relaxing again.
- Then take your mind up to your calf, knee and thigh.
- Stop in each body part to repeat the scanning, muscle tensing and relaxing.
- Repeat the exercise with your other leg.
- Move to a hand and work your way up both arms.
- Scan, tense and relax your back, stomach, chest, shoulders and face.
- You can either imagine your muscles tensing and relaxing, or physically tense and relax them – do what feels best.
- You'll know it's starting to work when your limbs begin to feel heavy and you're happy to sink comfortably into your mattress.
- You might find your mind wanders at times. Acknowledge any thoughts that arise in a positive way, but bring your mind gently back to the exercise.
- Combining these two exercises can be even better – try doing one followed by the other.



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## **Additionally:**

- Once in bed- focus on breathing and/or body scan exercises. Be careful about listening to music and be mindful that whatever happens as we fall asleep needs to be constant through the night to avoid the brain not feeling safe.
- If you wake up; avoid getting up and doing something-this may only train you to wake.
- If you need to use the bathroom, try to do so without turning on lights.
- Rest if you cannot sleep.
- Read or listen to music as you did at bedtime pick your reading and music material with sleep in mind!
- Encouraged not to focus on time or amounts of sleep just focus on being present, mindful and on your breathing as outlined.



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## Natural suggestions to support sleep, rest and relaxation

- Magnesium spray
- Epsom salt bath
- Essential Oils: chamomile, lavender , camphor, vetiver, chamomile
  - diffuser, candles, body lotion, bed and body spray
- Herbal tea, Chamomile/Lavender Tea
- Salt air purifier-good for sinus, snoring, asthma etc



## Supporting our teens

- Parents can assist this process by reflecting on their own sense of self
- Express unconditional love
- Have open communication that allow the adolescent to come to their own decisions with our support
- Actively listen; with your mind, body, heart and soul without interruption
- To be present and open to difference of opinions; to value and respect their opinions
- Continue to find ways of getting to know them
- Express belief in their capacity
- Be specific – providing positive feedback for particular efforts to be responsible and challenging actions that threaten their wellbeing and that of another.
- Stay emotionally present- at key times, morning, mealtimes, bedtimes- critical to developing a strong sense of self
- Be open about your own thoughts, feelings and experiences
- Create natural opportunities for engagement
- Communicate for a place of “I” rather than a place of You



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Initiating change can be hard for any household, huge competition of needs exist within busy households, coupled with social, study and extracurricular demands. Understanding that for teenagers a perfect storm erupts within. Collaborate, attune, problem solve and resolve together and make the changes, one step at a time. Being mindful of all the force factors that influence and impact their sleep and their evolving sense of self.





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