

## Sleep Difficulties

Sleep is vital to functioning well during the day. When a child has a poor sleeping pattern they may not get enough deep sleep and can have difficulty waking up in the morning. Infants often experience sleep problems in the first 9 months of life but if these difficulties persist there may be constitutional or emotional problems that underlie the sleep disturbance. Children with sleep disturbances can often have anxiety or behavioural problems and sleep deprivation can negatively impact on the child's ability to focus attention and this may result in behaviours that mimic attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

### The sleep environment

Where children sleep is an important aspect of sleep and sleeping alone vs in the parents bed/room are very different experiences. Due to the demands placed on children in our society it is usually helpful to start sleeping the 7 month old infant in their own space as this is that age at which they begin to negotiate issues surrounding trust, separation and attachment. As the child approaches the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of life sleeping alone provides him/her with an opportunity to feel secure with their own separateness and this is important to the development of healthy self esteem and self reliance. A home that is noisy, stimulation and lacking in routine will be less conducive to sleep than a more balance and clam environment. In addition if the child's bedroom is decorated too brightly and the room is generally disorganised the child may be less able to decrease their arousal level for sleep.

### Types of Sleep Disorders in Children

The most common sleep problem is insomnia where the child has difficulty falling and staying asleep. In some cases however a child may sleep for may hours of the day and night, somnolence. Regardless of the sleep problem medical problems such as sleep apnea, painful reflux, ear infections and allergies that may be contributing to sleep problems.

#### **The Hypersensitive Child**

Children who experience sensory sensitivities are easily aroused by sensory inputs such as sound and light and they may find it difficult to settle to sleep. This type of child may fuss about the bed linen or their pyjamas. These children have difficulty screening out noises in the environment to allow them to fall asleep and the slightest noise may agitate or reawaken them.

#### **The Child who Craves Movement**

Children who crave vestibular (movement) stimulation become hyper aroused by this input and this can affect their sleep patterns. These children become excited by the father coming home and night and loves to rough house before bed and they often crave proprioceptive (deep pressure) stimulation through climbing and pushing heavy objects etc.

## **Problems with Attachment and Separation**

Problems separating from the parent or caregiver can occur for several reasons, if a child has insecure or disorganised attachment these difficulties should be investigated and dealt with appropriately as a child who battles with attachment often becomes anxious when the parent or caregiver leaves and this can result in sleep problems.

### Sensory Strategies

- Massage and or joint compression prior to bed
- Weighted blankets such as a heavy duvet or 2 heavy blankets together
- Try different types of pyjamas – light or loose, silky or fleece
- Avoid winter pyjamas that have built in feet especially with a child with tactile defensiveness
- Check the bed linen and pyjamas for loose threads or ‘bare’ elastic that could result in irritation
- Consider the use of blackout curtains to block out light and the use of white noise to prevent awakening due to noise disturbance. A ‘bed tent’ is often useful as it blocks out light and noise as well as distractions in the bedroom while settling for sleep
- If your child is scared of the dark a small night with a warm glow can be used, this light should not be bright enough to cause shadows
- Have neutral walls in the bedroom and toys etc neatly packed away before bedtime
- Have a predictable bedtime routine
  - Warm bath (not hot) prior to bed, often a calming aromatherapy oil such as lavender can be useful but only if the child is not olfactory sensitive.
  - Use warm soft lighting in the bathroom to decrease arousal level
  - Dry your child with a large bath sheet that can wrap around their whole body and provide deep pressure or hugs through the towel – do not let them get cold so dry and dress in the warm bathroom
  - Brushing before bath or bedtime can help to decrease arousal level to aid settling to sleep.
  - Do not allow TV watching for the last 30 – 60 mins before bed, rather read a bedtime story in the warm and comfort of the child’s bed – choose the story carefully (not too exciting or dramatic) and read in a soft and calm voice.
  - Avoid rough and tumble play before bed
  - Ensure that your child goes to the toilet during their bedtime routine
- White noise or soft lullaby type music can be played to help the sensory sensitive child as this will remove the auditory distractions that may interfere with sleep.

If the above strategies are not successful in improving sleeping patterns it is advisable that a sleep log is kept, in this information regarding what activities were engaged in or meals that were eaten so that the problem can be investigated further and a more specific strategies can be given.