

TOPIC:

Sleep Issues in Foster Care

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:

**Read through this self-study*

**Fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire*

Sleep can be a blessing AND a challenge, especially for foster families. Sleep problems result from anxiety, not being able to sleep through the night, night terrors and nightmares, breathing issues, and not wanting to go to sleep. Each situation demands a parent’s patience and ability to determine what is going on for your specific child. Trauma history, age, daytime activities, sleeping environment, nighttime routines (or lack of), medical issues, restless legs syndrome, bed wetting, and seizures can all interrupt sleep. If you have a child with sleep challenges that are outside normal expectations, your first step is *always to talk with your health provider*. A thorough exam and understanding of a child’s physical health is always the first step.

Every child and youth does better with structure and a bedtime routine. This allows the child to make the transition and get into a rhythm of preparing for bedtime and soothing themselves into sleep. To create an effective bedtime routine for your foster child, take these initial steps.

If you have a child with sleep challenges that are outside normal sleep time challenges, your first step is always to talk with your doctor or pediatrician

1. Create a safe space Your child’s bedroom should be clean and tidy – a good tip is to make sure the room is dark, with thick curtains or blackout blinds and reduce outside noise with double glazed windows. Allow them to choose whether to keep their door open or closed – as this can give them a sense of flexibility and control over their own environment, which they’re likely to not have experienced before. Adding comforting items such as a favorite blanket or stuffed toy can make the space feel like their own, and increase relaxation.

2. Choose a bedtime Plan a bedtime that will allow your foster child to get as much sleep as is required at their stage of development. As a general rule, babies need 12-16 hours of sleep, toddlers need 11-14 hours, pre-school children need 10-13 hours, school children need 9-12 hours sleep and teenagers need 8-10 hours sleep.

3. Use the Four B’s

- Bath: A warm (not hot) bath will help your child relax and get ready for sleep.
- Brush: Remember dental hygiene.
- Books: Read a favorite bedtime story or encourage quiet reading before bed.
- Bed: Set a routine that your child can understand.

4. Stick with it Stick with the bedtime routine and set a morning wake-up routine, too! Getting your foster child in the habit of waking up at the same time each morning can ease them into falling asleep at night.

Other things may also interrupt the ability to sleep, especially for children who come from places of trauma or chaotic beginnings. Let’s troubleshoot some of those issues.

If your child can’t relax before bed: Due to learned behavior, your child might feel they need to be on constant alert, and this hypervigilance could be preventing sleep. Try to stop your child from using screens 1 hour before bedtime, and instead encourage more soothing activities such as a warm bath, listening to calm music, talking about their day or reading a story together. Keeping the lights dim encourages your child's body to produce the sleep hormone, melatonin. Repeating the same relaxing habits in the same order every night can help promote good sleep.

If your child is scared before bed: Lots of children have a fear of the dark or monsters under their beds, but foster children might also have a fear of being alone, unsafe, or abandoned. Your child might not want to, or know how to, talk about what they are afraid of. Reassure them that they are safe, and that you are there to care for them. Saying comforting words, such as “I am here if you need me” can help reaffirm to them that they are not alone. Some children

might prefer a baby monitor in their room, so they know you are reachable if they have a nightmare. A nightlight can also help keep fears of the dark at bay. Some children prefer to have their beds against the wall for security reasons.

If your child has anxiety or panic attacks before bed: Panic attacks can be scary, but it's important to stay calm whilst your foster child is experiencing a panic attack. Explain to your foster child that they are having a panic attack, and matter-of-factly explain the symptoms they are experiencing. Soothe your foster child, explaining it will pass soon. Teaching your foster child breathing exercises can help. Give them plenty of space after the panic-attack has subsided to calm down. Help them to shift their focus onto something more enjoyable like a pet, photograph, or toy. Above all, reassure them that they are not alone. If they are experiencing persistent panic attacks, it may be that they require professional help.

If your child is hyperactive before bed: Is your child running rings around you just when they should be winding down? It can feel like your child is misbehaving, but there are simple solutions to reduce how hyper your child is at bedtime. First, cut sugary, e-number and caffeine filled foods and drinks before bedtime. Non-ADHD causes of hyperactivity also include stress, medical conditions, lack of exercise and lack of sleep. Doing lots of fun exercise throughout the day like riding a bike or playing in the playground, eating healthy, and following the bedtime routine can reduce hyperactivity. If you're concerned, you can also talk to your health provider about your child's symptoms.

Facing a defiant child at bedtime Give it time. It may take a while before your foster child settles into their bedtime routine and can sleep through the night. Try setting small goals, such as encouraging the child to stay in their bed all night even if they are not sleeping the whole time and create a reward system for when this happens so they know what is expected of them. If you feel you need more support with managing a bedtime routine, you can speak with your GP.

WHAT ABOUT MELATONIN?
Foster parents should never use melatonin with youth in foster care without first consulting a medical provider and obtaining permission from OCS. While melatonin seems to have some success in shortening the time for children with ongoing sleep issues to fall asleep, it should not be used as a stand alone treatment and should always be used under the guidance of a health professional.



OTHER IDEAS TO HELP WITH SLEEP

Use a Weighted Blanket or Compression Blanket Weighted blankets are “grounding” and can really have a calming effect on children. What’s a weighted blanket? Basically, they are blankets filled with tiny pellets or woven into the fabric. The weight gets distributed across the body. Think of it kind of like a big bear hug. For lots of children, and adults, this can have a very calming effect.

Keep your child’s bedroom door open, if possible. Again, lack of permanence comes into play here. While this isn’t possible for all children, it can help your child hear you...and keep you “alive”. When new parents bring home their newborn, they often try to keep the house as quiet as possible when the little one is sleeping. For adopted and foster kiddos, they often need to hear mom and dad to assure they are still there. Hearing mom and dad assures them they have not been abandoned. It assures them they are not all alone.

Use A White Noise Machine White noise machines are a good option, especially for kiddos who wake up in the middle of the night. The rhythmic noise can be very soothing, and really be helpful for a child who is hyper-vigilant and listening for every little sound during the night. When you are on high alert, sleep and rest are a huge challenge. When it’s completely quiet, people with insomnia or other sleep difficulties focus more closely on small noises, which can interfere with their getting to sleep."

These tips came from : **Tips for Managing foster Children’s Bedtime Routines** at <https://www.capstonefostercare.co.uk> and **7 Ways to Stop Bedtime Battles With Your Adopted or Foster Child** from To Have Hope.com
