

How to support calm bedtimes in the early years

Bedtime can be distressing for a young child as they have a growing awareness that they will be separated from their primary caregiver. Children feel safe in relationship with a connected adult, and the strategies and activities that Thrive® advocates support the development of this bond. By spending some quiet time with a child at bedtime, you are helping to calm down their body systems. You are also helping them to develop their own self-regulations skills. A calm young child at bedtime will feel less stressed and safer so they will have a more beneficial sleep.

A positive and consistent routine is key for calmer bedtimes. Establishing this routine helps the quality and quantity of a young child's sleep. It also provides regulation and containment that enables them to feel safe within a trusted relationship and helps to enhance and deepen it.

Here are some ideas to support a calm bedtime:

- Use the 3 B's – bath, book, bed. Adopting this routine sends the young child the message that the day is coming to an end. It also gives them a repeated opportunity to have special time with their primary caregivers. Sharing books with the child helps with the development of their imagination and highlights the bond between them and their primary caregiver.
- Give the young child a hand massage with moisturiser or hand cream. This will be an opportunity for positive touch, a shared experience that will both calm the child and strengthen the link between them and the trusted adult. Consider combining a massage with a 'hand hug': cup their hands and squeeze along the child's arms and legs, starting at the tops of the limbs and working down, giving little 'hugs'.
- Use mindfulness apps such as Calm Kids or Moshi Sleep, or the GoNoodle online tool.
- Play calming music as the child gets ready for bed.
- Teach the child to 'comfort' their favourite toy, using regulation skills such as soothing, rocking and singing softly.

Here are some phrases that may help:

- 'Ooh it's almost time for our favourite time! The bath is nice and bubbly for you, then you can choose which book we are going to share tonight. We'll get all cosy soon.'
- 'I am noticing you're feeling a bit fidgety. Why don't we try a hand hug and massage?'
- 'Oh no! I think Teddy is upset! I'm wondering if you can help me calm him down? What might help him? What helps you?'

Additional resources:

GoNoodle.com (2024). 'Bedtime' [online]. Nashville, TN: GoNoodle. Available at <https://www.gonoodle.com/tags/eXAmX8/bedtime> (accessed on 10 May 2024).

Huggies (2024). 'How to create a relaxing bedtime routine for your child' [online]. London: Huggies. Available at: <https://www.huggies.co.uk/parenting-advice/baby-development/bedwetting/bedtime-routine-kids> (accessed on 10 May 2024).

Kelly Murray Sleep Consulting (2022). 'Strategies to help your child relax at bedtime and overnight' [online]. Chicago, IL: Kelly Murray Sleep Consulting. Available at <https://kellymurraysleep.com/the-sleepy-times/relaxation-techniques-for-bedtime> (accessed on 10 May 2024).