

# Sleep and exercise for children with neurodevelopmental conditions

**This leaflet explains how exercise may help children with neurodevelopmental conditions (differences in brain development and function) to sleep better. If you have any questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for your child.**

## Sleep in children with neurodevelopmental conditions

It is common for children with neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), to have trouble sleeping. There can be various possible reasons for this, such as:

- difficulties with settling, relaxing or unwinding at bedtime
- sensory issues, such as sensitivity to noise, light or certain textures, which can be distressing and keep the child awake
- increased anxiety
- irregular levels of melatonin, which is a hormone that regulates sleep patterns

Poor sleep can negatively affect the child and their family members in many ways.

## South London research on exercise and sleep

In 2021, a small study was done in the local area. The aim was to find out whether exercise might help children aged 5 to 15 with neurodevelopmental conditions to sleep better.

The study lasted for 10 weeks. During this time, the children did 3 hours of exercise each week (they had 2 exercise sessions a week lasting 1 hour 30 minutes each).

The children's parents said that:

- their children's sleep patterns improved
- their children woke up less frequently in the night
- their children's mood, behaviour and everyday skills improved
- their family's wellbeing improved

Based on this research, we recommend that parents and carers support their children to increase their activity levels. This may help with their sleep, health and wellbeing.

It is a good idea for children to exercise or play outside after school. This can help them to burn off energy and feel tired towards the end of the day. However, we recommend that children avoid exercise for 1 hour before they start their bedtime routine. If children are overstimulated too close to bedtime, they may struggle to unwind and fall asleep.

## Exercising in the local area

There are many free or low-cost sport and leisure activities for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. You can find some of these by searching for your borough's local offer page, or by using one of the following links:

- **Lambeth**  
**web** [www.lambeth.gov.uk/family-information-directory](http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/family-information-directory)
- **Southwark**  
**web** [localoffer.southwark.gov.uk/leisure/physical-activity](http://localoffer.southwark.gov.uk/leisure/physical-activity)

## Support and more information

Exercise alone may not solve a child's sleep issues. We recommend including exercise in a child's daily routine, together with other strategies to help with sleep.

All children benefit from a consistent bedtime routine, including:

- set times to go to bed and wake up
- activities to relax and unwind before bedtime away from screen-based devices

Some children with neurodevelopmental conditions benefit from:

- visual supports for their bedtime routine, such as a schedule with pictures to show what is happening now and the next steps
- ways of managing sensory issues, such as keeping the bedroom quiet, dark and cool

The following websites give more information on how you can help your child to sleep better:

- Helping you and your child sleep, Contact  
**Web** [contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/health-medical-information/common-concerns/helping-you-and-your-child-sleep](http://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/health-medical-information/common-concerns/helping-you-and-your-child-sleep)
- Sleep – a guide for parents of autistic children, National Autistic Society  
**web** [www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/sleep/parents](http://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/sleep/parents)
- How to sleep well for teenagers, Evelina London Children's Healthcare  
**web** [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/our-services/hospital/sleep-medicine-department/how-to-sleep-well-for-teenagers.aspx](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/our-services/hospital/sleep-medicine-department/how-to-sleep-well-for-teenagers.aspx)

If your child has, or continues to have, serious sleep problems, it is best to speak to their doctor or nurse. They can suggest other ways to help them get a better night's sleep.

### Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's sleep, please contact their GP, nurse, health visitor or another health professional caring for them.

For more information on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **web** [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets)



**Leaflet number: 5520/VER1**

Date published: April 2025

Review date: April 2028

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