

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

Sleep Struggles



the
RESTORE NETWORK
changing the culture of foster care

Regaining a feeling of safety takes time. Kids in foster care have experienced significant harm at the hands of their primary caregivers, and it's going to take awhile for them to fully trust us and to feel safe in our homes. We can see this especially at nighttime.

For our kids, nighttime might have been particularly scary. Our kids' hard stories might include some scary and traumatizing nighttime experiences: sexual abuse, overhearing their parents' aggression towards each other, being left alone in the house, or seeing frequent visitors to their home for drugs or prostitution.

A child who suddenly becomes hyperactive, aggressive, or shows other strange behaviors as we begin our bedtime routine, is likely showing us that this time of day is particularly scary and hard for him. He might not be able to tell us this with words, he will just show us through behaviors.

We also know that chronic fear and stress can change the way our body operates, messing with our natural rhythms which also affects our ability to fall and stay asleep.

Likewise, most of our kids did not have a bedtime routine before they came to us so our desire for them to follow along in our routine is going to take a lot of repetition and practice.

So, to tackle these nighttime struggles, let's start with empathy, understanding, and patience. Let's build extra time into our evening routines and make ourselves available to accommodate our child's unique needs.

And if you need some extra ideas, try these sleep tips to help the child in your home experience felt-safety at night. You don't need to do it all, just start with making a couple changes and see what helps. If you need additional support to navigate your child's sleep struggles, just reach out to your County Director!



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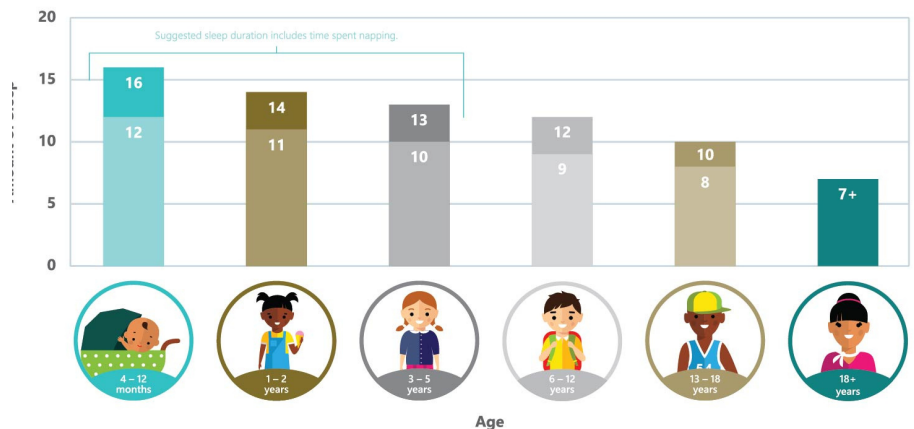
Understand the body's response to stress.

One of the ways that stress and trauma can affect a child is in their sleep patterns. The human body was designed to experience the release of cortisol, the stress chemical in safe amounts throughout the course of a day. This cortisol chemical release is then meant to be followed with a "happy" chemical like serotonin and oxytocin that bring a body back to a state of calm. This stress-relief combination sets your body up to meet the demands of life in a relatively healthy manner.

But if your body is used to being flooded with stress chemicals due to living in unsafe, unpredictable, and scary environments (like our kids), your stress levels are going to remain higher. If you do not have a safe and consistent caregiver meet your needs and bring you back to a state of calm, your body isn't going to be used to moving between these states of stress and relief. You will live in a more chronic state of fear. This chronic state of fear then messes with the release of a normal chemical that your body releases to help you with your sleep-wake cycle, melatonin. So for our kids, their bodies may not be operating optimally and at nighttime, their bodies might be flooding with cortisol, making them hypervigilant and awake instead of tired.

Healthy Sleep Duration

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that you get the following hours of sleep on a regular basis for optimal health at each stage of life.



[SleepEducation.org](https://www.sleepeducation.org)

A sleep health information resource by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine



The challenge: For teenagers, their natural release of melatonin to help prepare them for sleep actually doesn't come until around 11:00pm! So if you have a teenager who seems to want to chat and get things done late at night, that's quite normal! It makes sense then why a lot of our teenagers want/need to sleep in!



Keep in mind a child's developmental age.

The kids who are placed in our homes are often not emotionally or developmentally their actual age. What this means is that we may be parenting a 9 year old with the sleep needs of a 5 year old, etc. So we need to keep this in mind as we begin to make bedtime routines and set our child up for a successful sleep transition.

We'll want to ask ourselves. "What is the developmental age of my child? Are my expectations for him realistic?" "What support does he still need from me during bedtime?"

For instance, a 7 month old baby living in toxic stress, may have the sleep needs and patterns of a newborn and our expectation for him to sleep through the night will be inappropriate. A 12 year old who is closer to age 7 emotionally, will need more help with the bedtime routine than we might expect.



The challenge: It's hard to look at the body of our 10 year old who has the street smarts of a 25 year old, and still see a 5 year old. But that is exactly what can be going on with our child. His developmental and emotional needs...that's likely somewhere around half his age if he hasn't experienced a safe healing environment yet. So, we'll need to see beyond his age on paper and lower our expectations. He might be 10 but he might need the bedtime routine of a 5 year old. He might be 2, but need the sleep cycle of an infant.



Use the parent the child feels safest with.

It is normal for a child in foster care to bond and feel safest with one parent at the beginning. Who the child feels safest with generally depends on their story—who they were raised by, who harmed them, etc.

Please respect this fear and help the child learn to become more comfortable with the other parent slowly over time.

This may mean that one parent needs to take the lead on the bedtime routine (or other areas of the day such as diaper changes, bath time, getting dressed, etc). Then slowly over time include the other parent in elements of the evening routine. Do it together at first with both parents; then when the child is ready, have the other parent do parts of the routine alone.

Eventually, the child will grow in their relationship with the parent they were originally less comfortable with and we'll have more flexibility with who can assist with the bedtime routine.

Also, for those of us welcoming our older youth, don't assume they don't need a parent to help with bedtime! They are new in our home and may be new to what it's like to slow down in the evenings and prepare for bed. Even if they don't need us every step of the way, be available to just check on them as they go through their evenings, encouraging where we can.

And remember what we just said about developmental age. That older youth might still have the bedtime routine needs of a younger kid and he may welcome a structured routine or an evening reading time with us!



The challenge: In order to do this, we may have to make some changes to the patterns in our home and we might not want to. But it is really important we meet our kids where they are at in feeling safe and for a time we may have to make some sacrifices. However, if we make safety and connection a priority, our child will likely overcome their fears faster and we can go back to some of the things we prefer quicker.



Make a predictable routine.

In general, children thrive in routines. For a child placed with us through foster care, routines are even more important because they give the child predictability which calms the part of the brain that is operating in fear.

Each family's routine will look different, but the first step is to create one. Choose a bedtime routine start time and end time. Give kids reminders and countdowns as you approach the start of your routine so they're better able to successfully make the transition. Routines could include things like a snack, baths, brushing teeth, putting on pjs, a connecting or sensory ritual, etc.

Does a child need more time to accomplish all his bedtime steps before the end time? Then start the routine earlier in the evening to accommodate for any attention or sensory needs he has. For some children, a visual bedtime schedule can be helpful or a list of tasks. Some kids need to "see" what they need to do or "check-off" what they are accomplishing to stay on task.

If the schedule's going to be different because of a late night out or some kind of other known change, it's helpful for us to communicate this to our children and remind them as we get closer to bedtime. For instance, "Guys, we normally read three books before bed, but tonight we are only going to be able to read one because we are getting home late from the baseball game." Communicating it verbally ahead of time and using reminders will help prepare them to accept the change which will lessen the chance of a meltdown or control battle.

And again, let's not forget our older youth! It might be strange to think of setting up a bedtime routine with a teenager but it is probably needed! Negotiate a time with our youth for when electronic usage is over. Ask our youth to help come up with a few things he needs or wants that will help him prepare for sleep.



The challenge: Our kids are likely not used to a routine. Most children in foster care did NOT have bedtimes, wake times, help with routines, etc. so our child will need us to do these routines alongside him. After a few weeks of doing it together, you'll likely find them more compliant or able to do some pieces independently. Although, if you are parenting a child with attention or processing challenges, your support may be needed more long-term.



Give your child appropriate choices.

Feeling in control helps calm the fear response system and the best way to help a child feel in control is to share your power with them by offering choices. You can easily build in choices at certain parts of your bedtime routine and don't be surprised if you need to use this tool with older kids as well. Here are some ideas:

Do you want this or that for your bedtime snack?

Do you want to put your PJs on or brush your teeth next?

Do you want to wear these PJs or those PJs to bed?

Do you want to play a round of Uno or hearts before bed?

Do you want your nightlight on or off?

The best way to use choices is to pick two, both of which we are okay with, and then present the child those two choices. Stick with those choices unless the child presents a third, equally appropriate, choice and does so with respect. Open ended questions don't work with our children and can often leave them making no choice at all which can make us frustrated.



The challenge: If we think our child should just obey what we say, or if we take a “my way or the highway, do what I say” approach to bedtime that does not utilize some element of choice, we will set up a control battle with our child. We cannot win a control battle without using an element of fear (threats, raised voice, punishments, etc.) which doesn't help calm the fear response or encourage our children to see us as safe.



Give the child safe control over their bedroom.

If the child is older, talk about their bedroom and what they would need in there to feel safe and get a good night's rest.

Let them choose the sheets and the comforter set. They may have a sensory preference. Let them choose special items to have in bed with them. Let them choose what kind of pajamas they wear as some might make them feel safer than others. Let them move the furniture around to what is most comfortable for them.

If we have children sharing a bedroom, then help them make compromises or take turns on what makes each of them feel safe.

For a variety of reasons, some of our children are used to their homes being louder at nighttime. A quiet room may be preventing them from sleep! We can help them feel more comfortable by allowing them to play music or using a sound machine at night.

Some of our kids are NOT used to sleeping in a nice clean bed. They are used to sleeping on the sofa, a mattress on the floor, or even the car! Their request might seem unusual but when it is safe, we'll want to meet them where they are at. Maybe a sleeping bag on the floor next to their bed is their preference for a while, and slowly over time they'll crawl into their bed when they're ready.

Make sure to also communicate that the child's bedroom is a safe space for them. Make sure they know that only they can sit or lay in their bed: no one else. When putting them to sleep at night, pull up a chair next to their bed rather than sitting on the bed. This helps the child to feel safe and teaches them good boundaries.



The challenge: We may have our own preference for how a child's room is setup or how they should sleep. But at the beginning, we might have to let go of those preferences in order for the child to feel safe and for everyone in the house to get some sleep. Over time, we may be able to introduce some of our preferences once the child feels safe and connected to us but at the beginning, this is probably not a battle we want to get into.



Include food and hydration in the routine.

Our children need to eat and drink water every couple hours to keep their brains in optimal learning mode. So, if we had dinner several hours before bedtime, we'll want to add a bedtime snack to our routine (consider some high protein options below).

For children who struggle with a food insecurity (fear they won't get fed, fear there won't be enough, etc), consider putting a granola bar or a piece of fruit each night on a table next to their bed. Tell them they are welcome to eat the snack if they need to during the middle of the night.

Often times, just knowing the food is there within reach can calm a child and enable them to fall asleep. Usually, this intervention is needed for a small period of time before the child realizes that food will always be available to them and we can discontinue the intervention. For some kids who were deeply deprived of food, this may need to continue longer. Likewise, a water bottle next to their bed is a good idea too.

Or try giving them a glass of warm tea as part of their bedtime routine. We recommend trying out a version of the Sleepy Time tea!

Foods with Tryptophan can help as it plays a role in the production of serotonin, a mood stabilizer, and melatonin, which helps regulate sleep patterns. Here is a short list of foods that can be given around bedtime that promote sleep and you can read more at the link below:

cheese/dairy chicken turkey beans nuts oatmeal eggs

<https://www.livestrong.com/article/247974-list-of-foods-high-in-tryptophan/>



The challenge: Food in a child's room? No way, there will be bugs or wrappers all over the place! Ok, I hear you. So, include food items that are wrapped that won't attract bugs as easily, include a small trashcan next to the bed, and teach the child to bring it downstairs to empty every morning. This may be an unusual idea, but it works, so give it a try.



Include connecting rituals.

Like routines, rituals give children predictability and something to look forward to during the bedtime routine. Rituals build in connection which is also important during bedtime with our kids as it can help calm the fear response and gain some much desired bedtime compliance! With our older kids this may feel really strange or silly but remember many times our older kids have not had a story read to them or anyone want to hang out and chat with them or play a game. Don't skip this step just because you're raising teens! Find something that they're drawn to and let them enjoy this time with us. Again, every family will look different, but rituals can include:



Playing a game



Prayer time



Snuggles



Reading stories together



Listening to music



Exercising



Chatting in bed or hanging out in the kitchen eating a snack with your teen



The challenge: After a long day, we'll likely want to breeze through these steps or omit them altogether so we can move on, but building in connection through rituals is important for our child to feel safe and connected to us. Skip these steps and we'll likely have a child who keeps getting out of bed to connect with us! If you have more than one child in the family, try doing some of these routines all together, take turns, or divide and conquer if you are a two-parent family.



Use calming activities.

Consider the use of calming activities during bedtime routines for children & youth who seem to benefit from this slower end to the day. Our entire household can begin a calm down routine together by dimming lights, turning off screens, changing into clean pajamas, and lowering the temperature in our home to prepare for sleep..



Taking a warm bath, consider using epsom salts during it



Using essential oils, lavender is a good one to try



Snuggling



Reading books together or allowing our older youth to read alone



Giving our child a quick hand or back massage



Doing children's yoga together (Check out Cosmic Yoga on youtube!)



Stopping screen time 60-90 minutes before bed or using Blue Light glasses if needed



Listening to music



The challenge: We can't just tell our child to do these things. They generally won't unless they are older and enjoy these routines for themselves. For younger children or children recently placed in your home, you **MUST** do most of these calming rituals alongside the child to get compliance.



Use proprioceptive activities.

On the other hand, some of our children don't need calming rituals to get ready for bed. They need some deep pressure/proprioceptive work to meet a sensory need so their bodies can calm down and relax for bed. Here are some ideas:



Playfully wrestling with a parent



Receiving tight hugs



Deep pressure massages



Wall/chair pushes or other exercises



Carrying heavy items around the house (a great time to take out the trash!)



Wearing weighted clothing items, laying under a weighted blanket, using compression sheets



Going for a run

Some children may have sensory needs that contribute to their inability to fall or stay asleep (like proprioceptive needs mentioned above). If we suspect this might be the case, we can consider contacting early intervention, the school district, or a private clinic to get an evaluation done by an occupational therapist. Please be aware that these evaluations can take awhile to complete so consider doing some research about a sensory rich diet that can be put in place immediately that might help while awaiting an evaluation. If help is needed to get this process started, the Restore Network can help, just reach out to us.



The challenge: Again, children aren't going to naturally know that their body needs these things. We're going to have to do the activities alongside them at first and then teach the child to recognize how it makes them feel more prepared for sleep so they'll start doing the things on their own as they get older.



Practice outside of the moment.

One of the ways we can help bedtime go smoother is to practice the routine when it isn't bedtime! I know this might sound a bit silly and our older children might not go for it but especially for developmentally younger children, this can be a very helpful tool.

In the middle of the day, when our child is happy, well-fed, and regulated, announce that we are going to practice the bedtime routine. Go through the motions in our routine as if it were bedtime—all the way through tucking the child in bed, saying goodnight and leaving the room.

This can also be done through play by putting a stuffed animal or Barbie doll to bed. Through play, we can also pretend that we are the child and they are the parent and they can go through the routine giving us directives on what comes next. This role reversal gives young children control over the situation and can work to calm their own fears.

With older children we can still use walkie talkies or baby monitors to show children that we are able to hear them or see them when they need us. We can practice talking to each other in them during the daytime when they are not triggered in fear. Have the child practice being the safe adult and the child. We can then leave the walkie talkie in their bedroom at night so the child feels safe. Sometimes this simple act will be enough and they'll never actually use it.

Practicing the bedtime routine in the middle of the day, laughing and smiling through the funniness of it all, can help to ease them into the actual bedtime routine as they remember practicing it when they weren't fearful.

Doing this a few times can create a sense of felt-safety for our child and result in a more successful bedtime routine as we build new neural pathways for a safe bedtime routine for our kid.



The challenge: This intervention requires being proactive and playful—skills that don't come easily for every person. We might also feel like we don't have time for this, but be assured we can either invest the time during the day or we'll invest a lot of time at night.



Recognize the fear responses that night time can bring.

For a lot of our children, night time was a time when lots of scary things would happen. Our child may be SCARED when we tell him it's bedtime and revert to controlling, manipulative, and negative behaviors to delay the inevitable time for sleep. What he needs from us then is not a heavy hand, but empathy and understanding. Walk with him through the routine, present him choices, stay with him until he falls asleep.

For some kids, this season is short, for some kids it is longer. But please see the behaviors not as the willful disobedience of a child who doesn't want to go to bed but of a child who is on alert and scared. Trauma is encoded in memories so even if he can't tell us why he is scared, his body likely remembers why. Here are some additional ways that we can help our children feel safe for sleep.

- Rock the child to sleep each evening with a cup of milk like we do a little one.
- For older children, fill the child's bed with preferred blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals so they can feel comforted by the items surrounding them.
- Sit by the bed and hold his hand. Lay on the floor and rest until the child falls asleep.
- Make a pallet on the floor of the parent's room for the child to lay on if he wakes scared in the middle of the night.
- And this fear response isn't just for young kids! Our older kids feel it too. We can help them by just being present with them through their bedtime routine, offering our support and asking what they need, brainstorming a plan with them that will help them sleep better, and occasionally hanging out with them when they can't sleep.

Because every parent deeply desires an uninterrupted night of sleep, we can all be prone to dismissing the child who gets up in the middle of the night needing us. We can easily wave him back to his bedroom and tell him we'll talk about things in the morning. Sometimes, this might be an appropriate response. But for some of our kids, nighttime is when they remember their traumas and they can be in a particularly vulnerable place to share these stories with a trusting adult.

As sleepy as we will be (and we will be!), the middle of the night may be the time our child actually reveals hard things to us about their past that we were not aware of. Being able to share them with us at 2am might actually be the first step to healing their nighttime fears! Then we'll be able to talk more about it the next day and make a plan for how they can feel safer tomorrow night.

Quick Tips

1. Make sure the child feels safe with the caregiver doing the bedtime routine.
2. Give the child safe control over how their bedroom is set up.
3. Stick to a predictable bedtime routine.
4. Communicate ahead of time any changes there will be to the routine.
5. Practice the routine when it isn't bedtime.
6. Give the child a bedtime snack.
7. Build in choices for the child to make during the routine.
8. Build in connection and rituals to the bedtime routine.
9. Use a visual bedtime schedule to help if needed.
10. Address any sensory needs the child has.
11. Rock the child with a cup of milk before sleep.
12. Use a sound machine or play music in the child's room.
13. Fill an older child's bed with blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals to provide felt safety.
14. If child is having a fear response, stay with them until they fall asleep.
15. Put a sleeping bag on the floor of the adult's room if the child wakes scared in the middle of the night.
16. Talk to a doctor about sleep aides if needed, but also make sure to understand how chronic stress changes a child's natural sleep rhythms. Helping a child feel safe at night is a better long term option to promote a good night's sleep.



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