



Sleep Sweet

NB: For ease of reading and acknowledgement of gender equality, I use the pronouns for both genders interchangeably. :)

To achieve consistent, quality sleep for our little ones (and not so little ones), we sometimes need to pause and step back, and give them the tools to put themselves to bed and to eventually bring peace to the household ZZZZ

There is a load of research on the benefits of sleep; improving physical health, improving cognition (thinking and learning and remembering), improving emotional stability, improving immunity, and so on. In fact some doctors would say it is their first therapeutic tool, before medication or anything else, when responding to a sick patient. So, I won't take a lot of space explaining why our kids need sleep. Just trust me, they do. And so do their parents!

This article outlines a series of tools that are proven to have been useful in helping kids get to their bedrooms, stay in bed and fall asleep (all of these having their different challenges). Some tools are gleaned from experts whose advice is tried and tested, some ideas come from my own experience and some from the experience of other parents and clients.

The expectation is that you will take these ideas and CHANGE them to suit your context. Change the language and style to suit your personality and your child's personality. **Under the title of each tool, is a core principle statement in dark grey font. That is the important bit!** Make sure, that even if you change the way the tool is used, you keep the core principle in mind.

And now for the big, over-arching core principle

The aim is for your child to get to bed and to sleep without your help.

That means, we seek to give her the skills to build her own resilience and be able to express and tackle the feelings she has around sleep, HERSELF. You support her by letting her take control. It might seem counter-intuitive, but at first, that might mean letting her sleep in your bed or whatever her chosen issue is, but not letting it remain there. Your goal is to slowly and successfully transition your child into her own room, but in a way that acknowledges the anxiety that lies underneath the sleep issue.

page 1

1. Easy stuff first

Before diving into the tools related to mental and emotional health, first make sure that there isn't a physical problem impacting sleep

This may seem like a no-brainer, but sometimes we forget to look at the obvious things. So do a little checklist for yourself around two common areas that are relatively easy to fix: your child's bedroom and your child's body.

Check that your son's bedroom is a good temperature. Aussies need to turn the air-con off and use a fan instead, to keep a comfortable temp. Europeans need to lower the radiator temp and open the window a crack. Make sure the bed is comfortable, the linen is fresh (not prickly with pilling) and smells good, the pillow is the right shape and density (this can take a few tries with different types). Make sure the lighting is appropriate - dim (although more on that later). Make sure the noises of the house are not intrusive (ie. the flickering or loud volume of a television is unhelpful).

Once the room is checked, start to think about the two most common medical reasons children have difficulty sleeping: sleep apnea and low melatonin levels. Both of these can be tested for and treatment is available and has been highly for both conditions.

Melatonin is a hormone that assists in the sleeping process and is crucial for establishing the circadian rhythms that the body uses to know when to rest and when to rise. High melatonin levels make us sleepy and therefore if your child has low melatonin levels, she might find it hard to wind down or fall asleep. Melatonin levels can be tested with a blood test, a urine test or a saliva test. Doctors can prescribe melatonin, but it's important to get very good advice around using it for children.

If a child takes melatonin artificially, it can help kick start her body's natural production of melatonin and her sleep-wake cycle gets back into the right rhythm. However, taking too much melatonin or taking it for too long, can result in the body stopping its production of melatonin altogether (because it's getting its supply met). There are some over-the-counter melatonin products, but be careful to check with a doctor before administering anything to your child.

The most common form of sleep apnea is caused by an obstruction in breathing. The brain becomes aware of oxygen being limited and wakes you up, often with a snort or choking sound. In some cases, the sleeper

doesn't remember being woken, but being disrupted repeatedly like this can prevent the sleeper from reaching the deep levels of sleep required for good health. In other cases, and often with children, the sleeper wakes up startled and then finds it hard to return to sleep.

A sleep apnea test will most likely require a sleep study, either in a clinic or some clinicians in the US are conducting sleep studies in the home. This service has been designed with children on the autism spectrum (ASD) in mind. Many ASD kids have difficulty sleeping, but the idea of being tested with electrodes and sleeping in a strange place is so full of sensory overload and anxiety that it is counter productive. Hopefully this thoughtful and client-centred approach will reach further afield!

Link reference: [\(Check the article on sleep studies for ASD kids.\)](#)

2. What lies beneath

At the core of most sleep issues is anxiety ... but not necessarily anxiety about sleep.

Sleeping requires us to be vulnerable, to feel safe and to relax. We can't sleep in a state of arousal or when we are pumped full of adrenalin. In many cases of sleep disorders, lack of sleep is due to anxiety. Being in an anxious state is like being 'on guard' all the time, with many of the physical symptoms of fear, such as sweating, heart racing and upset stomach.

For children (and many adults), something completely unrelated to their sleep, could be causing sleep issues. Psychologists and professional educators have repeatedly seen sleep issues as a symptom to an underlying anxiety issue, rather than a n issue in itself.

In some cases, parents will be able to identify the trigger for their child's anxiety (a family crisis, a scary new teacher, the death of a pet), but many times they won't. There are different schools of thought around whether it's more important to build resilience against anxiety in the child or whether it's more important to find out the root cause.

Personally, I believe you should keep your eyes open for the root cause, and if you can identify it, then by all means do what you can to combat it. But ultimately, I think the most effective solution is to equip your child with the tools he needs to recognise and combat his own anxiety.

3. From worrier to warrior

These tools are practical, simple and designed to be implemented over a period of time, with patience, to help your child be their own hero in the battle against anxiety based sleep issues.

Good morning sunshine!

Regardless of how disrupted the night's sleep was, do your best to drag yourself (I know, it's hard) and your child into the sunlight. Go into the yard in your dressing gowns and slippers and ... pick some flowers, walk around the house, pat the dog, put seed out for the birds, anything at all. The task doesn't matter. What matters is that your child's brain registers natural sunlight. If the brain experiences daylight at an early hour (say, 7am), it can drastically help the body's rhythm to get back in line. So, early morning sunshine actually results in evening sleepiness. Brilliant!

Lose the logic

Don't make the mistake of thinking logic would help. Explaining your child is safe, giving reasons like, "I'm just downstairs", isn't necessarily going to help. His anxiety is not logical. And remember it's often not related to actual sleep. Just stop talking. Give hugs. And listen.

Note: Recognize that his fear is real. Never dismiss it in order to get your child past the problem.

Name the Feelings

This is a common tip for helping children with anxiety. So often they don't have the language to describe how anxiety feels, so rather than press them, have your child think up a silly name for the bad feelings they're having. For example: 'Frank.' Then tell your child to boss those bad feelings around.

"Frank, stop making me feel like that!" Or: "Go away, Frank!"

Deep breathing tricks

Slowing down and taking deep breaths is probably one of the most useful calming techniques you can teach your child. But often younger children, especially in a heightened state of anxiety don't want to slow down and find deep breathing boring. I recommend the following four tricks that require deep breathing, but feel like fun.

***Button Blow:** Ask your son to use a straw to blow on a button or a pom pom and move it across his dresser. He's not allowed to blow it off the dresser, so he needs to concentrate and be controlled. It requires a nice deep breath and slow release which is perfect for calming.*

***Happy Birthday:** Following the same principle of a single deep breath, released slowly, this task requires a lit candle. Of course you need to keep things safe for your child, but personally I love candle light to create a gentle ambiance in the room. Have your daughter take a big breath and hold the candle around 10 cm from her mouth. Then she has to sing "Happy Birthday" very softly, without blowing out the candle! The flame will flicker from the slowly expelled air, but with practice, she should be able to get all the way through the song in one breath and keep the flame lit.*

***Windmills:** Pick up some of those paper handheld windmills (or pinwheels) that you used to get at the fair when I was a kid! Your son can just lie in bed and blow on his windmill, to make it spin. Again deep breaths bring the best results and it has the added bonus of being visually distracting without becoming too entertaining.*

(I actually found a kit the other day (in Mr Price, Ireland), where kids can colour their own windmills and put them together.

***Party blowers:** Party blowers can be used in the same way, but be sure to remove the sound device or get silent ones. The last thing your household needs is to hear a shrieking party blower at 2am!*

STATS: In one study, children undergoing painful medical procedures were taught to blow into party blowers when they felt afraid. The results showed that anxiety was reduced by up to 40% in the children who used the party blowers.

Use your tech

Use the myriad of technological options we have today to be there for your child, even when you're not, by recording a personal message for her. There are loads of apps on iPhones or iPads that can be used to record or play. Alternatively, you can record using your computer and save it as an mp3.

If you can find an old iPod shuffle that doesn't have a screen, give your child a lesson in how to use it. Place on the iPod just a few quiet soothing music tracks, as well as two or three messages from you.

You can talk her through some meditation, physical winding down, give her a message of love, sing a lullaby, or anything else you like that is calming and loving (ie. skip the Van Halen).

Your message could say something like ...

“Hey darling, I’m so proud of you that you remembered to press play like we practised. Now I want you to fluff up your pillow and then lie back down feeling how comfy it is. Now take a big breath in through your nose like you’re smelling the most beautiful flower in the world, and then slowly let the air out like you’re blowing a dandelion around the room. Relax and then do it again, as many times as I like. Remember I love you and I’m looking forward to seeing you in the morning.”

Glowing Calm Bottle

You may already be familiar with the calm jars and bottles that have glitter and water or oil in them. They’re great, but can’t really be seen unless you turn the light on, which is too much stimulation for a child trying to wind down. After a little research, the wonderful humans of the internet showed me how to make a calm bottle that glows in the dark! I have experimented with a few lead lights and have found the light with the least wattage you can find is the best. I also darkened the water with purple food colouring to subdue the light a little. (I tried ink, but that just looked too creepy!) Also, avoid a glass bottle or jar. I used a plastic drink bottle and it worked a charm!

Your son can just have the glowing calm bottle sitting next to his bed and can lift it and turn it, watching the glitter gently fall.

LINK: [DIY Glowing Calm Bottle](#)

DIY Toolbox

Create a literal box of strategies from this list and anything else you have found. Keep it in your child’s room within reach of his bed. Show all the bits to your child slowly over time, introducing them as **TOOLS**. Talking about tools helps your child to see herself as a ‘worker’ who is equipped, rather than someone who needs help.

Practice each of the tools together at other times. Make it a fun, quiet, quality time with Mum or Dad.

Once they know how to use each tool, place it in the toolbox, and encourage your child by telling him that he is the boss of the toolbox. Let him know that he can use any of the tools when he’s feeling anxious and can’t sleep. Be sure to check in with him in the morning and ask him if he used any tools and how it went. If he knows you’re going to follow up in the morning, he’s less likely to call you in the night.

See over the page for examples of DIY Calming Toolbox tools.

DIY CALMING TOOLBOX

Here are just a few tried and tested ideas. Don't overload your child with too much. Introduce one new tool every few days. Some will be ignored and some will become favourites. It's all good. :)

Weighted cushion, toy or blanket



Silent fidget toy



Calming bottle
(Plastic bottle with water & glitter)



Sand pets (weighted and smooth)



Squeeze balls
(Balloons with flour)



Lavender pillow



Ipod with pre-recorded messages



Tissue paper
(To rip into a clip lock bag)



Ribbon ring
(different textured ribbon tied on a curtain ring)



Noise reducing headphones



Kaleidoscope



Breathing games (see above)



DIY CALMING BOOKLET

Include in your DIY Toolbox, this booklet of laminated cards strung on a keyring suggesting quiet winding down activities. Make sure you've practiced them with your child and include pictures as prompts!

(More info on our website: www.loviused.com)

- Hum a song
- Get a drink of water
- Finger tapping games
- Climb a mountain in your head
- Whisper the alphabet (or something familiar)
- Imagine your safe place
- Do push ups in your bed
- Hang your head over the edge of the bed
- Paint your room in your imagination
- Face scrunches (tighten & relax)
- Emu pounces on the blanket

4. Finally

You're equipping your child for the rest of her life. Be patient and don't forget to look after yourself.

Correcting disturbed sleep habits takes time and patience, especially patience. Do your best to resist the temptation to argue or cajole or dismiss the fears of your child. There is often no logic to them anyway, so a logical argument will rarely solve anything.

Remember to be kind to yourself as well. In as much as your child needs sleep for mental, physical and emotional well being, so do you! You're just a larger version of the same species and so your sleep needs must be prioritised as well. Share the responsibilities with your partner as much as possible. If you are a single parent, plan to implement some of the tougher strategies in the holidays or on a weekend where you can take time to rest - or rope in the grandparents, friends or pay a babysitter to take a shift.

Finally, keep in mind that the goal with resolving sleep issues, is not in targeting the sleep routine alone. You can certainly check that you've got good sleep hygiene practices (lighting, temperature, medical issues sorted), but ultimately giving your child tools to recognise his own anxious feelings and then to build resistance against anxiety is an invaluable gift that will continue to bring benefit to his sleep and his mental and emotional wellbeing throughout his entire life.

These articles are meant to be a guide and not prescriptive. Each individual's personality, experience and context will make every situation different. I hope this has been helpful for yours.

Find out more about the long game of parenting or check out the full series of articles at the website: www.loviused.com.

I love to get feedback, so feel free to comment in our safe & private Facebook group: **Flourish (Lovius Ed Consultancy)** or send me an email on info.loviused@gmail.com.

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