



NATP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



Centre of Excellence in
CHILD TRAUMA



Sleep

One of the most difficult issues for parents is that we get to the end of the day, wrung out physically and emotionally, we need a brain break to re-charge and protest, if only they would just go to sleep...However, many of our children really struggle with settling down at night. This can look like lots of different things:

- Control
- Ignoring
- Disrespecting
- Aggression
- Oppositional defiant behaviour
- Deliberately provoking
- Annoying
- Pressing our buttons

However, as we know, these behaviours all have one thing in common – they are driven by anxiety and fear. These fears may have roots in early experiences which may not be remembered as part of a narrative (explicit memory) but may be part of an implicit memory, known by the body but not consciously remembered. We think of bedtime as being warm, snuggly, comfy, safe. However our children may have literally experienced trauma related to night time, the dark, things being hidden, bedtime, being left alone, having terrible fears because they were left for hours at a time in the dark as a baby without having their needs met – a very real survival fear. Maybe they had to stay awake to protect themselves, their mum, their siblings?

Just as we become sleepy, the hidden fears and old trauma leak their way into our conscious mind – sometimes waking us back up again. Reflect on times when you have been very, very stressed – exhausted – and the minute your head hits the pillow unwanted thoughts start cycling round – it's the same sort of thing. We need to have it in mind that children who are adopted, fostered or otherwise looked after may have excellent reasons to fear sleep and fight it. A child from a secure background who suffered developmental trauma due to increased cortisol because of maternal stress (with attendant decreased dopamine) can equally be very fearful. These children will be seeking to maintain the closeness of the person that they feel most secure with by any means possible. They will need to be given a narrative and shown by repeated examples and repeated consistent experience that all is well.

What can we do?

- Fear is rooted in experience and stress. Help children to feel safe: stay nearby or in the room.
- Have a nightlight.
- Use relaxing aromas like Lavender. Lush Sleepy body lotion is good. Or buy essential oil of lavender for the bath (a few drops are all you need) or to sprinkle on pillows or toys.
- Increase relaxation by a hand, foot or head massage.
- Build their trust slowly – explain you need to go and get a cup of tea. Come straight back – prove you are trustworthy. “I told you I would be back, here I am”.
- Make enough noise to let them know they are not alone.
- Consistency, Predictability and Reliability builds brains – have a routine around bedtime. Stick to it like glue.
- Help the child to move on by giving them a new experience repeated multiple times. The same bedtime story, the same cuddle, the same mantra – you will keep them safe.
- Don't be in a hurry. Have a book or kindle nearby. Take the opportunity for a cat nap! The more relaxed you are, the more your calm amygdala will calm your child.
- Be prepared and patient. Overcoming night-time fears can often take months, or even longer.

Remember

At times of heightened anxiety symptoms may get worse or reappear. This might be due to contact with birth family, transitions or change of any sort including going on holiday, changes at school, changes to home routine for any reason, for some children even new bedclothes or a new topic at school. Let children know you see that they are scared. If you have an idea, wonder about this “I wonder if talking about families at school today has made you feel wobbly?” Reassure them.

Reflect with children during calm safe times during the day. Remind them you will keep them safe.

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If your child wants to take you down a “what if” wormhole, stick to the basic mantra. You will keep them safe, no matter what is happening.

When dealing with anxiety it is the age when the original trauma occurred that you are talking to, not the chronological age of the child. Regulate appropriately.