



## Sleeping

Many, many parents contact the office helpline to ask for advice regarding their children's sleep patterns. Most parents have gradually reached the point when they would like a complete night's sleep, but to encourage their children, especially one with a heart disorder, that sleeping through the night is the norm can be fraught with fears that it is the wrong thing to do.

### Routine

Persuading any child that going to bed and staying there is what young children should do is difficult for all of us. Many helpful relatives and friends will tell you to leave the child to cry itself to sleep but even for a parent of a healthy child that can be a very stressful thing to do.

Here are some helpful ideas that I have collected together from my own experience and from listening to others.

- Firstly only start to change night disturbance when you feel ready to. Don't let others make you feel that you should change things if you do not feel that the time is right.
  - Don't stop night feeding until a child is well established on solid food and regularly gaining weight. Some dieticians and health visitors may wish to continue with night feeding for some time.
  - Talk with your partner about how you are going to change the night time routine so that you are both supportive of the changes. Persuading children to sleep when you want them to can be very stressful. You need to be united to succeed.
1. At bedtime go upstairs and don't bring the baby or child back down even if they wake.
  2. Bath the baby and play in and around the bath time.

3. Darken the baby's room, nightlights and light mobiles can really appeal to children.
4. Introduce a story or play a story tape. Even young children like the sound of a voice calmly reading.
5. Give the child a milky bedtime drink quietly in their darkened room. Warm full tummies make for better sleep and it will also give you confidence that they have had food before bedtime. (Remember teeth cleaning is an important way to prevent tooth decay so try to include it in the night routine).
6. Place the baby in the cot with quiet gentle words.
7. If the baby cries always go to check that they are alright but unless they are ill don't lift them out of the cot. Put them down to sleep, without encouraging a conversation, and leave the room. Some people wait for a minute before returning if the children cry, others feel comfortable to leave them for five minutes. Gradually over days lengthen the time that you leave them. It can be helpful to turn on a light mobile, play a story tape or the radio as the children often settle better if there is a voice in the room. Parents ask if it is safe to leave a child with a heart problem to cry. Many doctors will advise parents that a short period of crying will not do any harm but if you are worried about your own child's needs ask your doctor or the Cardiac Liaison Sister and they will advise you as to what is safe for your child.
8. Once the children no longer need milk during the night only offer them water if they wake. They may need the fluid. Milk is food and often when the night feed is dropped the children feed better in the day. Many mothers who breastfeed have a difficult time with requests for milk because it is always around. If you feel that you are ready to drop a night feed then ask your partner to go to the baby in the night until the routine is established.

Once you have decided on the routine of your choice stick to it for at least two weeks. It can take a great deal of energy so only start it if you all feel fit and well. If you are worried about what the neighbours think about a few nights of crying just explain to them what you are trying to do. It is important to remember that children's sleep needs change as they get older but a well worked

out bedtime routine can start later in the evening with perhaps fathers taking over at bath and play time or alternating story time.

If there are other children in the family they can join in and listen to the story and share the bath time fun.

One of the most important things about persuading any child to do anything is to try and keep calm.

If things become stressful walk away until you feel you can cope again.

*"I can remember when I first decided that I was the boss not my 3 month old daughter. I employed many of the above ideas for a structured bedtime routine. The first night I sat for a long time on the stairs feeling a terrible parent as my daughter fought sleep defiantly. Ten days later she slept as soon as I put her down to sleep and by using the same routine has always gone to bed easily until she became a teenager. My son who is five years younger went into the same routine as soon as he came home from the hospital (although I did allow him feeds through the night!)."*