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# Sleep Seekers

Living with ADHD 24/7

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Sleep Seekers  
LIVING WITH ADHD 24/7



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## Introduction

### **As every parent knows, sleep is central to a child's wellbeing**

Children need about nine to ten hours of sleep each night,<sup>1</sup> but this is easier said than done if your child has ADHD. ADHD affects all parts of the day<sup>2</sup> so it is no surprise that evening routines are fraught with difficulty and bedtimes can be a nightmare.

The relationship between sleep and ADHD is complex<sup>2</sup> and can be a vicious circle:<sup>2</sup> ADHD can lead to sleep problems and a lack of sleep can make the symptoms of ADHD worse. Furthermore, certain medications for ADHD can lead to further sleep difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

Some studies suggest that a lack of sleep can negatively impact on a child's emotions, concentration and task performance,<sup>4</sup> as well as affect the wider family's quality of life.<sup>2</sup> Parents will suffer from a lack of sleep because of the stressful evenings and interrupted nights, and this has a knock-on effect on the ability to cope with the child's challenging behaviour, whilst causing stress among and between other family members.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to recognise and understand the extent of your child's difficulty, to rule out any separate sleep disorder and to begin to find ways of making bedtimes less of a battleground. This booklet aims to outline what is known about ADHD and sleep and provide practical advice and support.



**Sleep Seekers**

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## Are you a Sleep Seeker?

If you are a parent of a child with ADHD and experiencing extreme or regular sleep disruption and tiredness, **you are not alone!**

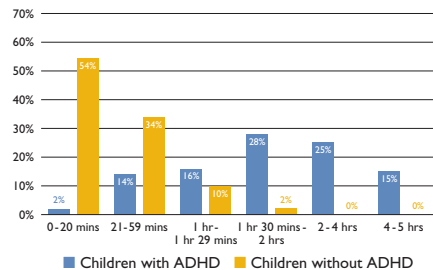
*“Many parents of children with ADHD tend to struggle-on regardless, not recognising that their sleep problems are adding to the difficulties they already face parenting a child with ADHD. Parents should be aware that sleep difficulties are very common in children with ADHD, but that their specialist may be able to suggest ways of making evenings and bedtime less chaotic and stressful”*

*Dr Valerie Harpin, Consultant Neurodevelopmental Paediatrician, Sheffield Children’s NHS Trust*

A recent parent survey<sup>5</sup> has compared parents of children with ADHD with parents of children who do not have ADHD. The results show big differences in the amount and quality of sleep they are getting.

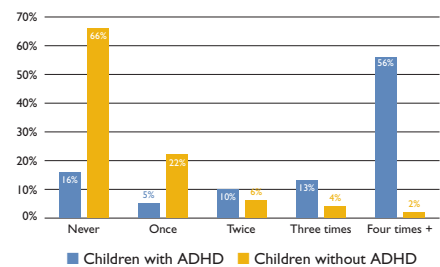
### Average time taken to settle the child to sleep<sup>a</sup>

Parents were asked: How long on average would you say it takes for your child to fall asleep?

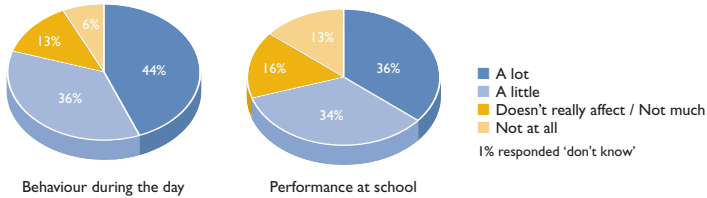


### Number of times the child gets up after being put to bed<sup>b</sup>

Parents were asked: Whilst you are trying to settle your child to sleep, how many times on average does your child get up?



### Parents' assessment of the effect tiredness has on child's behaviour and performance at school<sup>6</sup>



### Other survey findings included:<sup>5</sup>

- 42% of parents of children with ADHD are **woken by their child before 6am<sup>d</sup>**
- 70% of parents felt more **irritable** during the day and 61% felt **unable to concentrate<sup>e</sup>**
- 61% of parents felt **less able to cope with problems** and 56% felt **depressed** due to the tiredness<sup>e</sup>
- 43% of parents said that tiredness **impacted a lot on their relationship** with their partner<sup>f</sup> with 46% saying they **argued with their partner more often<sup>g</sup>**
- Nearly a fifth of parents had **taken time off work** in the past year due to tiredness<sup>h</sup> and 64% had **cancelled or avoided social activities** in the past six months<sup>i</sup>

*Please see back of leaflet for specific questions*

## Family Stress Points: Bedtime Blues and Sleepless Nights

It is a familiar story for parents of children with ADHD: the evening leading up to bedtime can be stressful because the symptoms of ADHD make calming bedtime routines difficult. Simply recognising the nature and extent of the disturbances can be the first important step towards improving the situation.

Filling in a sleep diary can help identify the times of particular difficulty for you and your child. This might uncover the main pressure points and could be useful for starting discussions with your doctor.

**“Keeping track of your child's sleep problems and patterns can help you to think about the quantity and quality of sleep your child is getting, and how this is then impacting on your family life in general. By sharing this information with your doctor, you should begin to make informed decisions regarding managing the problems”**

*Dr Chris Idzikowski, Director of the Sleep Assessment and Advisory Service*

## Sleep Diary

Photocopy and fill in this weekly sleep diary to help you monitor the sleep problems that are associated with your child's ADHD. You might also want to describe how your child's sleep problems have affected him/her the following day and impacted on the rest of the family.

	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
The time he/she was initially put to bed							
The time he/she fell asleep							
Number of times he/she got out of bed							
Your actions after he/she got out of bed							
Triggers for him/her waking or getting up							
List the last food/drink taken before bed							
Time of last food/drink taken before bed							
Pre-bedtime activities							
Time of morning waking							
Tiredness next day (on a scale of 1-5)							
Irritability next day (1-5)							
Concentration at school next day (1-5)							
Any other comments							

## Coping with Night-time Tantrums and Daily Tiredness

### **Charlotte, the mother of Joe who has ADHD, shares some of her early experiences:**

*"At bedtime, Joe didn't seem able to switch off or slow down. We tried implementing all the regular routines that you're told to do, but it wouldn't take much more than a phone call to throw it off. A warm bath would turn into a water fight, or a milky drink would get spilled. If I turned round to load or unload the dishwasher, or turned my attention to one of my other children, in a second Joe would run to switch on the telly or get out the toys.*

*Once he was settled into his bedroom, we'd make the house as dark and quiet as possible, but any little bit of noise would get him going again. Joe shared a room with his older brother so it wouldn't take long before the two of them were up.*

*He was unable to stop going over the events of the day. He used to say, "I can't sleep because it's all going on in my head."*

*He would normally wake up at least once or twice in the middle of the night and come into our room to wake us up, asking questions like, "What's your favourite Power Ranger?"*

*My husband and I would be shattered all day long. When you have a quiet minute to yourself you just want to sit down and read the paper, and then you feel guilty that you're not using that time for positive parenting.*

*It also has a big effect on your social life. It was hard getting away because finding a babysitter was near impossible, a teenager couldn't handle the responsibility.*

*That was how we lived for eight years. Once Joe started on the medication, everything changed so quickly. He suddenly seemed more able to calm himself down. When I look back it's like I'm describing somebody else's life."*

## Fast Facts

- **Increasing your child's sleep by as little as half an hour can dramatically improve school performance<sup>1</sup>**
- **By addressing sleep problems you may find that your child's ADHD symptoms improve<sup>1</sup>**
- **Some studies suggest that better sleep will improve a child's concentration and ability to learn<sup>4</sup>**

## Back on Track for a Better Night's Sleep

Sleep-friendly foods and routines can help banish those bedtime blues and begin to improve the quality and quantity of your child's sleep.

### **Exercise**

Daytime exercise can make a big difference in helping children gain quality sleep at night. Encourage your child to do some light exercise such as walking, skipping, or playing a team sport every day, but avoid strenuous physical activity for a few hours before bedtime.<sup>6</sup>

### **Sleep hygiene**

Make sure your child goes to sleep at the same time each night and gets up at the same time each morning. Also keeping the bedroom dark, quiet and at a comfortable temperature will help promote sleep. Try to avoid over-stimulating activities during the evening before bed, such as watching television, playing a computer game or reading an exciting book. You may decide to take a television or computer out of a child's room to avoid temptation!<sup>6</sup>



## Food

Try to avoid giving your child a large meal a few hours before he/she goes to bed.<sup>6</sup> Also you may decide to cut out certain foods if they exacerbate the symptoms of ADHD, such as food with additives, colours, or foods high in sugar. Children should also avoid foods containing caffeine, such as cola, chocolate and tea.<sup>7</sup> Caffeine remains in the body for three to five hours on average, but can affect some people up to 12 hours later.<sup>6</sup>

## Sleep diary

A sleep diary can be a very useful assessment technique for identifying and understanding sleep problems.<sup>3</sup> You may wish to use the diary on page 4 in this booklet.

## ADHD medication

A recent parental survey demonstrated that many treatments for ADHD begin to wear off by the late afternoon and evening.<sup>8</sup> Therefore your child's ADHD may not be well controlled while you are trying to settle him/her down to sleep and during the night. Different treatments last for different lengths of time, so you may want to review your child's medication regime with your doctor. In addition, some treatments for ADHD have been found to make it more difficult for the child to fall asleep.<sup>3</sup>

## Seek help from your specialist doctor

Because every child is different, make sure you have discussed all the treatment and medication options with your doctor, who can advise you on managing ADHD during the evening, bedtime and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Sleeping medication is not often used in children but sometimes your specialist may wish to discuss this with you if your child's sleep remains a significant problem despite other management steps.<sup>9</sup>

## ADHD and Sleep Disorders

Sleep disorders are fairly common in children and some sleep disorders seem to be more common if the child has ADHD.<sup>3</sup> It may be worth discussing these with your specialist doctor if you recognise the symptoms in your own child.<sup>2</sup>

### **Insomnia**

This is a sleep disturbance resulting in difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep.<sup>4</sup> People with healthy sleeping habits fall asleep in about 10 to 20 minutes.<sup>4</sup> A treatment goal is to reduce the time it takes to go to sleep to below 30 minutes.<sup>4</sup>

### **Nightmares**

Most children have occasional nightmares and it seems to be a normal part of growing up. Stressful things that happen during the day can turn dreams into nightmares.<sup>10</sup> Simply being there to cuddle and soothe your child after a nightmare will help, or you could try talking about the nightmare and making up a happy ending to the story.

### **Snoring and breathing problems**

Snoring is common in children, affecting up to 12% of those between the ages of one and nine.<sup>11</sup> Research has shown that as many as 25% of children with ADHD may experience regular snoring.<sup>2</sup> A small number of children who snore loudly may have sleep apnoea, which is characterised by struggling for breath followed by awakening and gasping for air. Sleep apnoea can also worsen hyperactivity and inattentiveness.<sup>11</sup>

### **Teeth grinding**

Grinding the teeth during sleep is common in children with ADHD,<sup>12</sup> but they are unlikely to realise they are doing it. If the condition is not treated, it can lead to more problems including gum disease and additional wear and tear on the teeth.<sup>13</sup>

### **Bed wetting**

Also known as enuresis, bed wetting up to the age of five is not unusual. If your child is older than five and still wetting the bed during the night, talk to your doctor. Bed wetting is not caused by drinking too much before bedtime, and it does not happen because of reluctance to get out of bed to go to the bathroom. Although not directly associated with ADHD, because of the guilt and embarrassment a child feels, it can lead to behavioural problems.<sup>14</sup>

### **Daytime sleepiness**

Children with ADHD usually show symptoms of hyperactivity and inattention during the day, however, they are also more likely to experience daytime sleepiness.<sup>12</sup>

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- 14 Family Doctor - Enuresis. <http://familydoctor.org/366.xml>. Access date: 10/11/2005

## Footnotes

Parents of children with ADHD\* and without ADHD^ were asked the following questions: **a\*\*A**: How long on average (numeric hrs-mins) would you say it takes for your child to fall asleep? (unprompted) **b\*\*A**: Whilst you are trying to settle your child to sleep, how many times on average does your child get up? (unprompted) **c\***: Using the following scale, please tell me how you think that resulting daytime tiredness affects: (a) Your child's performance at school? (b) Your child's behaviour during the day? (1) Not at all; (2) Not much; (3) Doesn't really affect it; (4) A little; (5) A lot. (prompted) **d\*\*A**: What time on average (24hr clock) are you woken up in the morning? (unprompted) **e\*\*A**: How does this reduction in sleep impact on your work/daytime activities? (prompted) **f\***: Using the following scale, does this tiredness negatively impact on your relationship with your partner? (1) Not at all; (2) Not much; (3) Doesn't really affect it; (4) A little; (5) A lot. (prompted) **g\***: In what way does the tiredness affect your relationship with your partner? (prompted) **h\*\*A**: How many times (numeric 0-200) in the last year, if any, have you taken time off work due to tiredness? (unprompted) **i\*\*A**: How many times (numeric 0-100) in the last six months have you cancelled/avoided social activities because you are too tired to attend? (unprompted)

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## Further sources of help

**There are many ADHD support groups across the country. To find the one nearest you, contact ADDISS, The National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service:**

**[www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk)**

Phone: 020 8906 9068

Fax: 020 8959 0727

Address: ADDISS, 10 Station Road, Mill Hill, London NW7 2JU

***“Lack of sleep and sleep disruption are so common for parents of children with ADHD. ADHD will always bring extra challenges and we encourage parents to seek the very best help available. In addition to discussing all your concerns with your specialist, we recommend getting in touch with local ADHD groups who can provide support and advice”***

*Andrea Billow, Founder of ADDISS*

There is a wealth of useful information on managing ADHD in your family on **[www.adhdmatters.co.uk](http://www.adhdmatters.co.uk)**



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