

Sleep-deprived children at Christmas? Eating and activity tips for a good night's sleep

With excitement levels high during the Christmas period (and other highly anticipated events such as birthdays or holidays) children's lack of sleep is often a real problem for parents to contend with. In addition to the accumulative effects of poor sleep and high adrenaline levels, many foods children eat at this time are high in sugar and this also affects their mood and energy levels. It's no wonder then that helping our families be happy, relaxed and in the festive spirit is easier said than done. The National Sleep Foundation recommends that between the ages of 1–3 children need 14 hours sleep. This reduces to 10–11 hours for school-aged children. While this may be impossible to achieve at Christmas – particularly on Christmas Eve – there are things we can do to help our children get a good night's sleep.



Balancing blood sugar - It is challenging at this time of year, but keeping our children's blood sugar levels well balanced throughout the day will have an impact on their night time levels and, therefore, on how well they sleep. Starting each day with a good quality protein breakfast such as eggs or yoghurt will result in a better sugar level balance and a sustained feeling of fullness. Also, choose appropriate snacks throughout the day. Treats are, of course, a part of the Christmas celebrations, but make sure you include more protein and fibre rich snacks. For example, apple and cheese, oatcakes and cottage cheese, and berries with yoghurt.

Stimulants - As well as high sugar consumption, caffeine can cause children to become excited restless and irritable. Limiting children's caffeine intake can therefore help aid sleep. Because children have lower body weights than adults, even small amounts of caffeine can have very intense effects. Caffeine is found in chocolate and some fizzy drinks like Cola.

Nutrient rich foods - Children's holiday diets can be low in calcium and magnesium which are key nutrients for sleep because they work together to calm the body by relaxing nerves and muscles. Calcium-rich foods include cheese, watercress, sunflower seeds, yoghurt, broccoli, whole milk and cottage cheese. Magnesium-rich foods include brown rice, apricots, dates, cheese, avocado, sunflower seeds, peas, banana, blackberry, broccoli, cauliflower and carrot. Other foods that can promote calmness are those that are high in tryptophan, which helps produce our sleep hormone. Tryptophan-rich foods include avocado, cheese, chicken, cottage cheese, eggs, turkey, yoghurt and oats. These can be ideal bedtime snacks for children who are struggling to calm down and get off to sleep.

Light/outdoors - Research has shown that light exposure during the day has an impact on our sleep, greater exposure to sunlight bringing far deeper sleep during the night. Arrange for your children to spend time outside if possible – a walk in the park, playing on the swings or kicking a ball around in the garden, for instance.

Exercise - Keeping children active throughout the day can help to reduce restlessness, reduce stress levels and bring a sense of wellbeing, all of which also help promote good sleep. As well as being fun, swimming, cycling and walking are all great things to do together as a family during the holidays and help to keep everyone active.

Screen time - Limit children's exposure to TV and digital screens including tablets, computers and mobiles, particularly before bedtime.

There's unlikely to be a parent in the world who would not agree with the experts that the value of sleep cannot be underestimated. Let's help our children eat and play to sleep, and let's have a great family Christmas.

About the author

The Food Teacher, Katharine Tate, has worked as a teacher and education consultant internationally in primary and secondary schools for over 20 years. Qualified as a registered nutritional therapist, Katharine combines her unique education and nutrition expertise to offer advice, education programmes, practical workshops, and individual/family consultations. For more information visit her website www.thefoodteacher.co.uk



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