

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #181: Better Nights, Brighter Days: Simple Tips to Help Kids with ADHD Sleep Soundly

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Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Mallory: Today Lori and I are talking about cleaning up something, but it's not about bathroom hygiene, messy bedrooms, or potty mouths.

Lori: No, we're talking about cleaning up sleep. You may have heard the term sleep hygiene before.

Mallory: Yeah. And it's not about going to bed clean, like showered, fresh out of the bath, but that doesn't hurt. But we know that so many of our listeners tell us all the time that sleep is a huge challenge for their ADHD families. And actually, the research shows that kids with

ADHD do struggle more with sleep than their peers. They struggle to fall asleep; they struggle to stay asleep, they don't wake up rested. So, we know this is a huge challenge for families.

Lori: And our work with families as child psychologists, we love when we can give quick, simple wins to address these challenges for kids' lives, so sleep hygiene is one of those really quick wins that we can give parents.

Mallory: Absolutely. And healthy sleep is just so fundamental to supporting our ADHD kids. When our kids are underslept, we're gonna be dealing with more challenging behavior, more difficulties with attention, more impulsive behavior. It's just so fundamental to make sure these kids are getting good sleep.

Lori: Yes. So today we're going to be giving you 10 tips, which I know seems like a lot, it seems like a lot to us, but you don't need to do all of them. Hopefully you won't need to put all of them into place and many of you guys will have already been doing some of them. But maybe try, as we're going through these today, to think of two to three small things that you can do to your child's sleep, and routine and sleep hygiene at night to make things easier and better for your family and help your kids sleep better.

Mallory: Absolutely. And also, just a quick note before we dive into those 10 things, we don't want you to feel like you have to make any of these changes. If sleep is going fine for your family, like if it's going well enough, leave it alone. Just take what makes sense for you and then leave the rest.

Lori: Yes. So, the first tip we have is for you guys to think about having a consistent bedtime routine. So, we talk all the time about how important it is for our kids with ADHD to really have routines and set routines. They thrive on the routines and the consistency and predictability that gives them. It helps kids feel safe and secure. It gives them clear expectations which is going to help their behaviors in the long run. I know many kids with ADHD seem like they're impulsive and they don't like that consistency, but they really do thrive on it. So, putting into place of bedtime routine helps our kids' bodies relax. At certain times at night our bodies are very routinized so that predictability signals, even our kids to kind of get tired or start releasing the hormones they need to fall asleep at night, so that predictability is so important. And most people start bedtimes about an hour to 30 minutes

before the time that their child is like in bed, lights out, ready to fall asleep on their own. Again, we have just to let you know, we have some visual routines and things to kind of help support you that we'll put in the show notes that you can take a look at if you don't have a clear consistent bedtime routine for your child.

Mallory: Absolutely. And kind of going off of Lori's point of having a very consistent bedtime routine to signal to your child's body that it's time to relax. You also, our second point here is you also want to make sure that you're incorporating relaxing bedtime activities into that bedtime routine. And I know that for some families, my family included, that's why I say this is like, it tends to be the time of day where my kids are like ramping up, they're wrestling, dad is getting in on it. We feel like we're doing these like big tumble rough activities and I feel like that's great during the day to get some of that energy out, like kids really need that, but as you're getting closer to bedtime, you want to be kind of moving away from that physical activity, that rough play and incorporating some things that are a little bit more relaxing. So maybe your child has a relaxation strategy that's really helpful for them, like deep breathing, maybe they know how to do muscle relaxation or guided imagery. Just things that are going to help their body wind down and prepare for sleep. If you've followed us for any length of time or listen to our podcast before, you probably know how much we love the Zenimal it's a screen free meditation device. We love that as part of kind of the wind down routine, especially for kids with ADHD and also especially for kids with anxiety. If they get into bed and their mind is like still racing, you know, those thoughts are, you know, their brain is still on fire, the Zenimal or other, you know, meditation apps can really help calm their brain down, focus on relaxing their body and can really help prepare the body to fall asleep.

Lori: Yes. And our third point is to talk a little bit about screen use before bed. And this has been a really tricky area for a lot of the families that I work with, so if this is you, I would say if you're gonna think about changing kind of one thing in your child's routine, this is like a really important one. We know from the research the relationship between evening television viewing and problems with kids sleep, especially when kids have a television in their bedroom. So, whenever I'm talking with families and they tell me there's a TV in the bedroom, that's like one of the first things we talk about when they're having trouble with sleep is kind of removing that from the bedroom for a variety of reasons, but that's something to think about. We also really encourage families to shut down screen use an hour before bed

and eliminate that. Just because, and that includes when I say screens some people are like, what is that? Is that television? Is that a tablet? It's everything. Television, computers, tablets, phones. And I would say at least an hour. I honestly, and I don't know about you Mal, but like even if my kids watch TV an hour, an hour and a half before bed, I feel like they have a hard time. So, I would say at a minimum an hour, but if not more. And again, I talked to so many families that are like, we shut it off at 10pm and it's like, well, are you, are you then expecting your child to fall asleep at 11? Which is not reasonable even for teenagers. So really think about like when that is a good time at night. So, screens again are really mentally stimulating. There is blue light from these devices that will trick our bodies and brains into thinking that it is still daytime. So, it inhibits our body's release of melatonin, which is a hormone that is released at night when it starts to get dark, our body naturally releases the hormone to relax ourselves and help fall asleep. So, if there's no melatonin release at night, then your child's not going to feel sleepy and again, it's going to be very hard for them to fall asleep quickly at night. So, when we think about one area, you can have a quick win, this is a really quick win to think about.

Mallory: Absolutely. So important for families to think about. Our fourth tip or our fourth sleep hygiene strategy is to keep your sleep and wake times as consistent as possible. So, try to keep consistency with the timing that your child is fall following asleep, but also when they're waking up. And this definitely gets harder as you know, they become teenagers in high school, they want to sleep in, they're sleeping until the afternoon. But in general, we are going to kids and adults alike, we are going to help ourselves fall asleep and stay asleep better if we're not deviating our bedtime or our wake time by more than about 30 minutes to an hour. And it all has to do with our body's natural circadian rhythm. And if we deviate too much from that schedule, it's going to throw our bodies off and it's going to make it harder to fall asleep when we need to. So, you know, give yourself some grace around the holidays, kids are going to go to bed later, they might sleep in later. But the more you can be consistent with the time your child is falling asleep and then waking up, maybe you need to wake them up, the easier sleep is going to become. So again, even on the weekends, maybe you want to give your child an extra little sleep in, try not to give more than 30 minutes to an hour or come Sunday night, you're going to be struggling with them being able to fall asleep. They're going to wake up groggy on Monday morning. So, keep those regular sleep and wake times as much as possible.

Lori: Yeah, I have a hard time sleeping. And when I was pregnant, I went through a cognitive behavioral therapy program for insomnia and one of the very first things that they have you do is track when you fall asleep, when you wake up, and then they tell you when you should fall asleep, when you should wake up based on that data. And it's so interesting that that small thing that I did basically fixed my sleep challenges. So, it doesn't seem like a big deal, but our bodies really are very predictable in helping us fall asleep at the same time if we keep those predictable bedtimes. So, the fifth point is, noise and light in the room. So again, we want to keep noise to a minimum, and use white noise sometimes if possible. And again, if your child likes it, I know not all children are going to like white noise machines. Our house has a house fan that sounds like you're in an airplane, so it's super loud. And it's funny because if I go to like, a hotel and there's no fan, I cannot sleep. So, we definitely use that in our house and it kind of drowns out other noises so the kids can sleep at night. Also making sure that the room is dark. So, one thing we try and say is if it should be dark enough that you can't see words on a page. So, if your child could still read, it was light enough to read, it's probably not dark enough. I know my kids still like to have the door cracked and have a little bit of light because they get scared at night and that's totally okay, but dark is good. And we have, you know, again, when it's summer, room darkening shades are really important to block out that sunlight if it's coming into the room at like 4 or 5 in the morning, that's going to really make it hard for your kids to sleep in in the morning.

Mallory: Absolutely. And kind of going along with the noise and the sound, our sixth point here is that you also want to make sure that the bedroom is at a great temperature. So actually, our body temperature needs to drop in order to fall asleep. So, if your child is dressed in super warm PJs or your house is too warm, which is honestly a consistent problem here in Arizona unless you want like a thousand dollars electric bill. If your house is too warm, it's going to be harder for your child, it's going to be harder for you to fall asleep because the body temperature needs to drop in order to fall asleep. So, try to keep your child's bedroom as cool as possible. Maybe they need to dress cooler, but then have blankets for them so they can kind of regulate their temperature throughout the night; warmer or colder as they need it. But how can you make your child's bedroom a little bit cooler to help that body temperature drop and fall asleep.

Lori: Yes. So important. And then the seventh point is to make sure that your child is getting natural light during the day. So just like, at night, having it dark helps release that hormone,

our body has these natural kind of cycles and daylight helps to trigger that. It helps our body to wake up in the morning and it also is going to, again help with sleep at night. So make sure your child gets daylight, especially in the morning, if they can even go outside and play for five minutes before you head out to school and get some natural sunlight, it's going to help again, regulate that internal sleep-wake clock that they have. So keeping the blinds open in the house, opening curtains, just getting that sunshine in is just going to be so important.

Mallory: Absolutely. And another thing that you can do during the day to help with your child's sleep at night, probably one that you've thought of before, is that make sure your child is getting enough physical activity during the day. It's going to help them sleep better at night, if they've had ample opportunity throughout the day to kind of move their body, get their heart rate up, get that energy out. I know that's not a problem for my boys. So, make sure that there's plenty of opportunity to get some physical activity in during the day to help. Again, it just helps regulate those sleep wake cycles and helps them be sleepier at bedtime.

Lori: Yes. And our ninth point is to keep the bed for just sleeping and I would say even keep their bedroom in many instances just for sleeping. And this is important again, our bodies really get into very clear cycles. So, when they hear, if our kids hear the same song every night and they get in bed, their bodies start to initiate like sleep, it's easier for them. If they've been in the bed using a screen, reading, doing homework, their body is more alert and gets kind of conditioned to be alert because it's used to doing those things in bed and it associates the bed with being active. So, we want to really just keep bed for sleeping. I know my daughter has been reading in bed at night with a reading light and that actually helps her. So, I know sometimes reading before bed can actually be a good thing for our kids. But homework where it's very like they're having to put a lot of mental effort into that, again, can be kind of challenging. Even using the bedroom and having a desk in the bedroom for homework could be, it's something to think about, but could be making it harder to fall asleep at night in their bed. If they're kind of thinking about homework or stressing about school work or things like that in their bedroom, that can make it harder. Again, the bed is not a place for completing work, not a place for screens. It's just going to really help them fall asleep and stay asleep better if they only associate that with sleeping.

Mallory: Yeah, this is a really important one, but a challenging one for families, especially if they don't have a ton of space in their home, right. But their child might need to do some of

those things in the bedroom, but the more you can keep it out of the bed, the better. Because those sleep associations are just so important and when kids start to associate their bed with not being able to fall asleep, or they associate their bed with stressful things, the harder it is going to be for our kids to fall asleep at night. And when I was still in private practice and working with families that were struggling with sleep, we would talk about how the ideal time to fall asleep, like once lights are out and you're closing your eyes, you should be able to fall asleep within five to 15 minutes. If you're falling asleep in less than five minutes, you're over tired. If it's taking you longer than 15 minutes, then kind of we have a problem that we need to kind of problem solve and help you fall asleep more quickly. And in some cases the recommendation, again, if your family is really struggling, if your child has spent more than 15 minutes in bed with their eyes closed and they're still not falling asleep, the recommendation would be to get out of bed, have a cozy corner in your room where you kind of sit down and you read a book with a really low light for a couple minutes until you start to fall asleep, until you start to feel sleepy and then you get back in bed. And again, this is to all avoid that sleep association of bed means I'm struggling to fall asleep. Bed means I can't sleep. Bed means my mind is racing. So, this is kind of like, I would say like a tier two thing, like if your child is really struggling with that, something to consider. But again, I can't highlight more like the importance of these sleep associations when it comes to our kids being able to fall asleep.

Lori: Yeah.

Mallory: Okay, Last point, number 10. Just consider, how naps might be impacting your child's sleep. So, your child may kind of have grown out of those daily naps at this point. They may be an occasional thing. Obviously limiting naps during the day, especially long naps or naps that are happening later in the afternoon, those are going to impact your child's sleep drive, their ability to fall asleep at night. So, the more that you can limit naps, the better. Also let's say your child had a late night the night before, so they wake up early, so they're a little less rested than usual. Better would be for them to have an early bedtime rather than trying to catch a nap in most cases. So, if you can, you know, keep your child awake up until an earlier bedtime to kind of catch up, make up for that sleep debt, that's preferred to napping because napping can have a big impact on how tired your child is at night.

Lori: Yeah. And I see this a lot in tweens and teens, even where they're at school all day, they come home, they nap sometimes for an hour or two and then they're up to like 2 or 3 in the morning. Then they're having to get up for school, they're exhausted, they come up and it becomes really a not a great cycle. And then usually when they're doing stuff at 2 and 3 in the morning, it's not things that you want them to be doing and it's usually a screen related. So again, those naps are, it becomes just kind of a really bad cycle for sleep. Really bad. And many times, again it goes back to like being on screens and things like that at night that makes it hard to fall asleep and then they're exhausted and it's, it's hard, it's a hard cycle to get out of.

Mallory: Yeah.

Lori: But the research really shows that we all have again, different sleep needs and are impacted differently by lack of sleep. So, if sleep is not a problem for you or your child, again, there's no need to fix it. Don't worry about anything that we just said. Even if you're not doing all the things that we've talked about in these sleep habits, it's not a big deal if your child is sleeping fine. Like I said, my daughter reads before bed and it's been really helpful, honestly for her to kind of turn off her mind at night and fall asleep better. So sometimes these might not apply to you and that's totally okay.

Mallory: Yeah. But if after, if sleep is a problem for you and you've kind of addressed this list of sleep hygiene tips, it's definitely time to talk to your child's pediatrician. Especially if your child is snoring, if they're waking up in the night gasping for air. If your child has kind of a good sleep duration, so let's say they've slept for 10 hours, but they're still waking up tired at night, so maybe they're not getting quality sleep, these are all reasons to speak to your child's primary care provider to rule out, get more information about possible underlying medical issues that are impacting their sleep length or their sleep quality.

Lori: Yeah, I cannot express how many families have gone and sometimes like their pediatrician hasn't necessarily recommended, but they felt like we need to have a sleep study. That's just something in my gut just doesn't feel right about it. Done a sleep study and have found that they were not getting adequate REM at night. They had sleep apnea, again, issues that they really needed to know that they needed to treat, and their child was sleeping so much better. I know my brother didn't find out he had sleep apnea until he was like, an older adult. And it was such a game changer for his ability to, like, wake up in the morning, fall

asleep at night, have quality asleep. So, ADHD is just unfortunately associated with sleep challenges, so it can be really important to rule out any medical things that are going on. So, your key takeaway today is if your child's struggling to fall asleep, struggling to stay asleep at night, and not waking up rested, or waking up very early, these are all an excellent starting point for you and can really help develop some healthy sleep habits.

Katie: Thanks for listening to *Shining with ADHD* by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!