

10 Sleep Strategies for children

1. Cover One Eye

- How to do it: Have your child lie down and gently cover one eye with their hand or an eye mask for a few minutes until they feel calm.
- Why it works: Covering one eye reduces visual stimulation and calms the brain's occipital lobe (responsible for processing vision). This technique lowers neural activity and helps transition the brain from alertness to restfulness (Siegel, 2012).

2. Say Random Words in Your Mind

- How to do it: Ask your child to think of a series of random, unrelated words like "apple," "sun," "book," "river," repeating each one in quick succession.
- Why it works: Saying random, disconnected words distracts the mind from forming coherent, stress-related thoughts. This can prevent overthinking and help the brain mimic the micro-dream phase—short, random dream sequences experienced before deeper sleep. These micro-dreams signal the brain that it's safe to begin the sleep process (Stickgold, 2005; Edelman, 2010).

3. Squeeze a Soft Object

- How to do it: Provide your child with a soft toy or stress ball. They should squeeze it tightly for a few seconds, then relax, repeating several times.
- Why it works: Squeezing provides proprioceptive input, which helps calm the nervous system and promotes sensory regulation. This pressure activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which encourages relaxation (Pfeiffer et al., 2011).

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4. Use Deep Breathing

- How to do it: Teach your child the "4-7-8" technique: inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, exhale for 8 seconds.
- Why it works: Deep breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, which reduces the body's stress response and activates the relaxation response, slowing the heart rate and calming the mind (Brown & Gerbarg, 2012).

5. Trace Shapes on the Blanket

- How to do it: Ask your child to lie down and trace simple shapes like circles or squares with their finger on the blanket or bed cover.
- Why it works: Tracing shapes shifts the brain's focus to a repetitive, calming task. It reduces overactivity in the prefrontal cortex, helping the brain transition from wakefulness to a more restful state (Anderson et al., 2016).

6. Focus on Body Scanning

- How to do it: Guide your child to focus on each part of their body, starting from their toes and moving up. Ask them to relax each muscle group.
- Script: "Start by noticing your toes. Are they warm or cool? Let them relax. Now, focus on your feet. Let them become heavy and relaxed. Slowly move up, from your calves to your knees, thighs, and so on."
- Why it works: Body scanning increases body awareness and reduces stress by activating interoceptive pathways, which shifts attention away from external stimuli and promotes relaxation (Craig, 2015).

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7. Hum a Calming Tune

- How to do it: Encourage your child to softly hum a relaxing song, focusing on the vibrations in their throat.
- Why it works: Humming activates the vagus nerve, which promotes parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) activity. The vibrations create a calming effect, helping reduce stress and anxiety (Porges, 2017).

8. Use a Weighted Blanket or Soft Toy

- How to do it: Use a weighted blanket that is 10% of your child's body weight plus 1-2 kg. Alternatively, use a weighted soft toy that is about 10% of their body weight.
- Why it works: The deep pressure from a weighted blanket or soft toy increases serotonin and melatonin, which are crucial for sleep, and decreases cortisol (the stress hormone). This pressure mimics the feeling of a hug, providing comfort and reducing anxiety (Gringras et al., 2014). For example, a child weighing 25 kg would use a blanket weighing about 3.5 kg.

9. Visualize a Safe Place

- How to do it: Ask your child to close their eyes and imagine a safe, relaxing place, like the beach or their favorite room. Encourage them to focus on details like sounds and smells.
- Why it works: Visualization activates the brain's default mode network, helping shift it away from stress-driven thoughts. This process encourages relaxation and helps induce sleep (Fox et al., 2015).

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10. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- How to do it: Teach your child to tense and relax their muscles, starting from their toes and moving upwards. Ask them to hold the tension for 5 seconds before releasing.
- Script: "Start by tensing your toes. Hold the tension for 5 seconds, then relax. Now move to your feet, hold for 5 seconds, and relax. Continue this up through your legs, stomach, arms, and face."
- Why it works: Progressive muscle relaxation reduces muscle tension and lowers the body's overall stress levels. It promotes parasympathetic activity, signaling to the body that it is safe to fall asleep (Jacobson, 1938; Bernstein & Borkovec, 1973).

References:

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