



DR HARRY WOODWARD — PAEDIATRICIAN

FROM CHAOS TO CONFIDENCE

Why Sleep Changes Everything



YOU ARE DOING A BETTER JOB
THAN YOU THINK.



I WANT YOU TO **PICTURE A CHILD.**

Maybe your son. Maybe your daughter.
Maybe your grandchild. Maybe a child you care for.



THEIR SMILE



THEIR
STRENGTHS



THEIR QUIRKS

THE THINGS THAT MAKE THEM **UNIQUELY THEM.**

Keep that child in your mind throughout today's talk.

Because that child is why we're here.

Not naughty

Not difficult

Deeply
loved

NOT BECAUSE THEY WON'T SLEEP.
BUT BECAUSE **THEY ARE LOVED.**

And because we want them to thrive.

THINK BACK

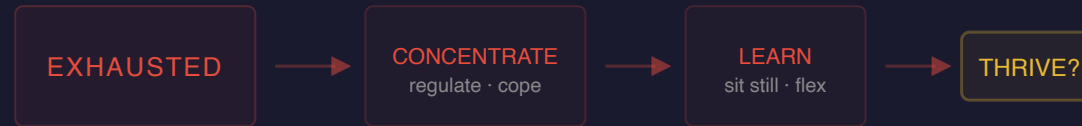
THE LAST TIME YOU HAD A REALLY GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP.

- More patient?
- More optimistic?
- More resilient?
- More like yourself?

NOW THE OPPOSITE

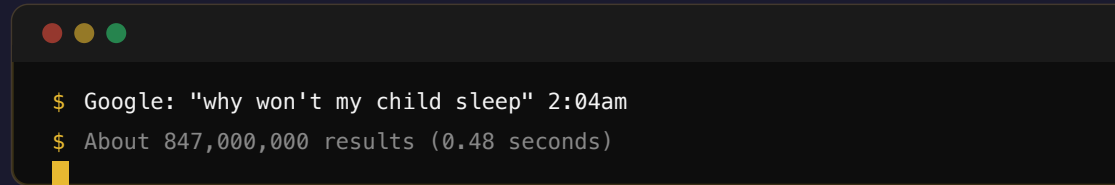
THE LAST TRULY DREADFUL NIGHT'S SLEEP.

- Less patient?
- More irritable?
- More emotional?
- More overwhelmed?



WHEN CHILDREN ARE EXHAUSTED,
WE STILL EXPECT THEM TO **REGULATE**
BEAUTIFULLY.

That's a very big ask for a tired brain.



WHO HAS **GOOGLED** SLEEP ADVICE AFTER MIDNIGHT?

Sitting on the edge of your child's bed at 2am...

You're my people.



"IF MY CHILD WOULD JUST **SLEEP**,
EVERYTHING ELSE WOULD FEEL EASIER."

You are not alone. Thousands of families feel exactly this.



ONE PARENT SAID TO ME

"DOCTOR, I FEEL AWFUL SAYING THIS OUT LOUD,
BUT I DREAD BEDTIME."

Two hours of negotiation. Tears. Frustration. Exhaustion.

Night after night.

DON'T RECOGNISE THE PERSON

I'VE BECOME."

Sleep deprivation changes families.
It changes children. It changes parents. It changes relationships.



BUT — AND THIS IS THE REALLY
IMPORTANT MESSAGE —
THERE IS **HOPE.**

A PERSONAL NOTE

BECOMING A PARENT MADE ME A FAR MORE COMPASSIONATE DOCTOR.

- Before children: I understood sleep difficulties **intellectually**
- After children: I understood them **emotionally**
- Those are **two very different things**

MY HOPE FOR TODAY



UNDERSTANDING

Why sleep matters and how it works



CONFIDENCE

A clearer path forward for your family



HOPE

Things can and do improve

Exhausted families don't need judgement.
They need understanding, support, and hope.

SECTION 1 OF 6

WHY SLEEP MATTERS

LESS TIRED
common view



SLEEP AFFECTS EVERYTHING
attention · learning · emotions · behaviour · health

SLEEP ISN'T SIMPLY ABOUT **BEING LESS
TIRED.**

Sleep affects almost every aspect of a child's life.

SLEEP AFFECTS



ATTENTION



LEARNING



EMOTIONS



BEHAVIOUR



ANXIETY

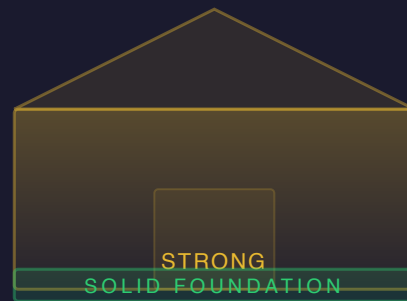


PHYSICAL HEALTH



FAMILY LIFE

THINK OF IT THIS WAY



SLEEP IS THE **FOUNDATION** OF A HOUSE.

When foundations are shaky, cracks appear everywhere.

WHEN THE FOUNDATION IS **SHAKY**, CRACKS APPEAR IN...

- Attention & learning
- Behaviour & emotional regulation
- Relationships at home
- Parent wellbeing
- Everything becomes harder

THINK OF IT LIKE THIS



battery remaining

A CHILD'S BRAIN STUCK AT 10% BATTERY.

You can still function. But everything takes more effort.
Slower. More frustrated. More mistakes. Running on empty.

MANY OF OUR CHILDREN ARE NAVIGATING
SCHOOL, FRIENDSHIPS AND FAMILY LIFE
WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL BATTERY
PERMANENTLY STUCK AT 10%.

And that's before we even think about ADHD or autism.

A FAMILY I'LL NEVER FORGET

THEY CAME TO ME WORRIED ABOUT BEHAVIOUR.

- Frequent meltdowns
- School concerned about concentration
- Relationships at home becoming strained

Everybody was focused on behaviour.
So I asked a simple question.



Dr Harry: "Tell me about sleep."



THE PARENTS LOOKED AT EACH OTHER
AND LAUGHED.

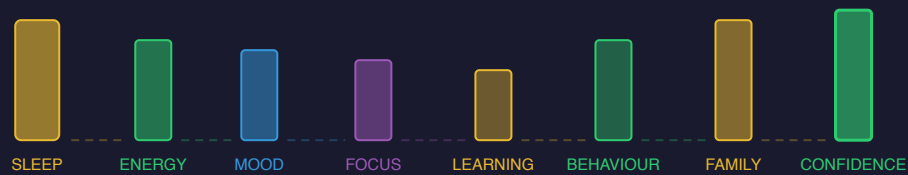
Not because it was funny. Because they hadn't had a proper night's sleep in years.

”

"IT FEELS LIKE WE'VE GOT
OUR SON BACK."

That sentence has stayed with me ever since.

Because *that's the power of sleep.*



SLEEP IS THE FIRST DOMINO.

When that domino falls, confidence begins to grow.

SPOKE 1 OF THE CONFIDENCE WHEEL

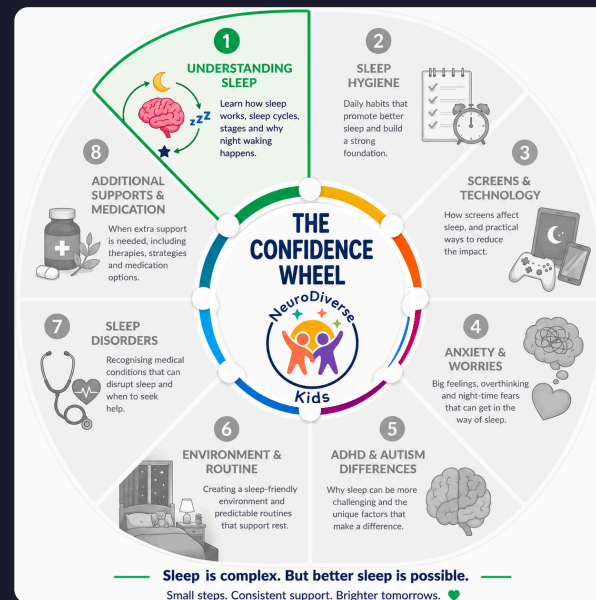
THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL



Eight sub-spokes. Each one a barrier — and an opportunity.

SUB-SPOKE 1 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

UNDERSTANDING SLEEP





CHILDREN ARE NOT
BAD SLEEPERS.

CHILDREN EXPERIENCE
BARRIERS TO SLEEP.



"HOW ON EARTH ARE YOU STILL AWAKE?"

Many parents assume this means they're doing something wrong.
Often, that's not true — the child's brain is simply *working differently*.

SYSTEM 1

SLEEP PRESSURE

WAKE UP

BEDTIME

PRESSURE BUILDS THROUGH THE DAY

Heavy eyelids. Yawning. Harder to concentrate.
The longer we are awake, the greater the pressure becomes.

SYSTEM 2

THE BODY CLOCK



Our brain's internal clock — the *circadian rhythm* — tells us when to feel awake and when to feel sleepy.

 MORNING LIGHT

Tells the brain:

"It's time to wake up."



 EVENING DARKNESS

Tells the brain:

"Prepare for sleep."

Light is one of the most powerful signals for our body clock.

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

MYTH

Melatonin makes children fall asleep

≠

TRUTH

Melatonin is a **messenger** — it tells the brain
"night-time has arrived"

Melatonin is not a sleeping tablet.
It's a signal. A cue. A preparation.

ADHD & AUTISM

CHILDREN WITH ADHD AND AUTISM OFTEN EXPERIENCE THESE SYSTEMS DIFFERENTLY.

- Some don't build sleep pressure in the same way
- Some have body clocks that run later
- Wide awake at 10pm — can't wake in the morning

This isn't bad parenting. The brain is simply working differently.

UNDERSTANDING CHANGES EVERYTHING

OLD QUESTION

"What's wrong
with my child?"



BETTER QUESTION

"What **barriers** might
my child be facing?"

That is a much kinder — and much more helpful — question.

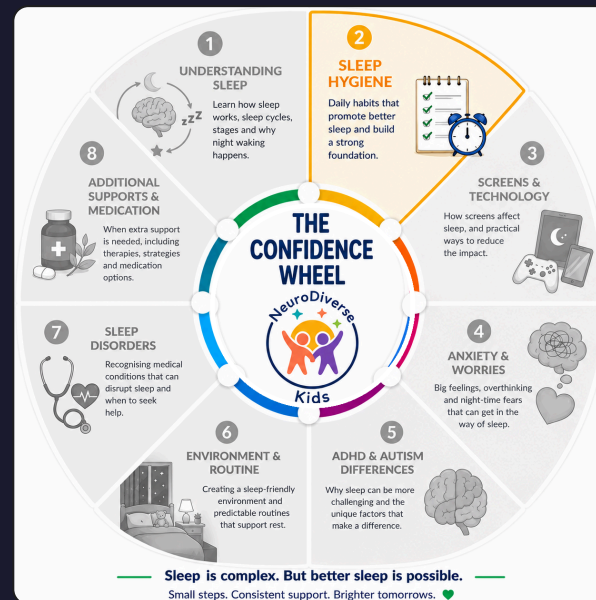


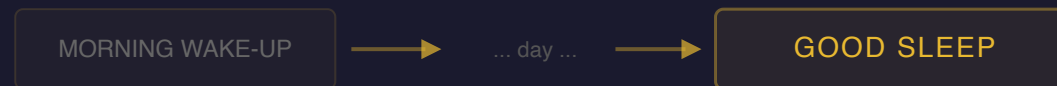
CHILDREN ARE NOT BAD SLEEPERS. CHILDREN EXPERIENCE **BARRIERS TO SLEEP.**

When we understand those barriers, we respond with curiosity,
compassion, and hope.

SUB-SPOKE 2 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS





GOOD SLEEP DOESN'T BEGIN AT **BEDTIME.**

Good sleep actually begins the moment your child wakes up in the morning.

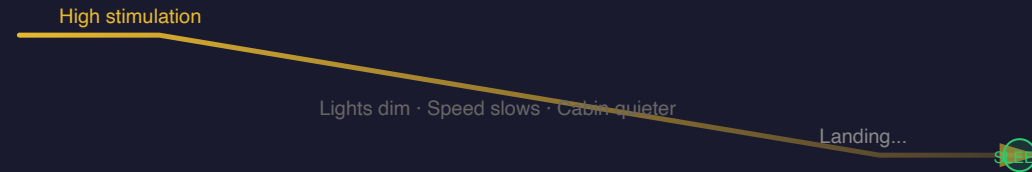


KEEP YOUR HANDS UP IF IT WORKS
EXACTLY AS PLANNED EVERY SINGLE NIGHT.

Because real life gets in the way.

And that's completely normal.

THINK OF BEDTIME LIKE THIS



AEROPLANES DON'T SWITCH OFF THEIR ENGINES AT 35,000 FEET.

They descend gradually. Children's brains are very similar.
Especially children with ADHD and autism.

THE WIND-DOWN ROUTINE

A PREDICTABLE ROUTINE SENDS
THE BRAIN AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE.



"THE DAY IS ENDING"



"SLEEP IS COMING"

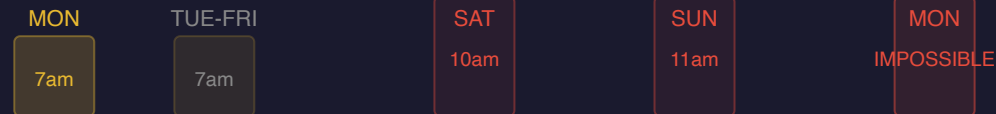
Not because routines magically make children sleep.
But because they *reduce uncertainty*.

OFTEN OVERLOOKED

MORNING LIGHT IS ONE OF THE MOST **POWERFUL TOOLS** YOU HAVE.

- **Same wake time each morning** — sets the body clock
- **Bright morning light** — tells the brain "time to be awake"
- **Helps the brain know** when to feel sleepy that evening

THE WEEKEND TRAP



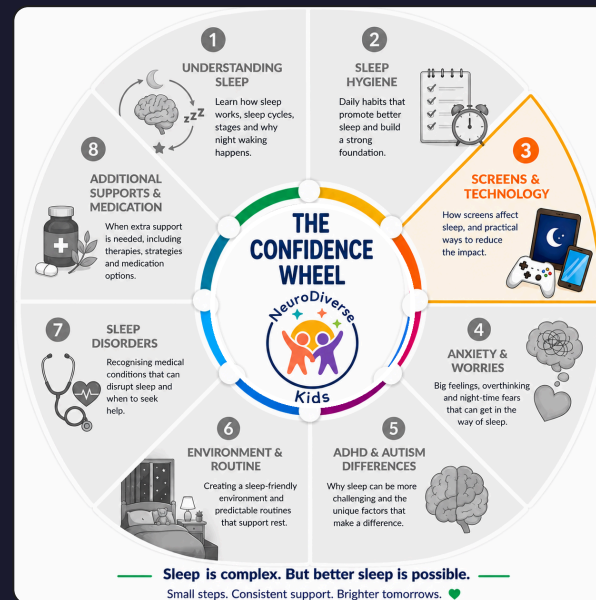
SLEEPING IN AT WEEKENDS IS LIKE
TRAVELLING ACROSS **TIME ZONES** TWICE A WEEK.

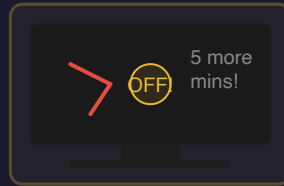
THREE PRACTICAL MESSAGES

- 1. Aim for consistency, not perfection
- 2. Create a predictable wind-down routine that works for your family
- 3. Remember that healthy sleep starts in the morning, not at bedtime

SUB-SPOKE 3 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

SCREENS & TECHNOLOGY





WHO HAS **ARGUED** ABOUT TURNING OFF A SCREEN?

I was beginning to worry it was just my house.



SCREENS ARE NOT THE ENEMY.

SCREENS PROVIDE

ENJOYMENT

Play, fun, and pleasure

CONNECTION

"That's where my friends are"

ACHIEVEMENT

"The one thing I'm really good
at"

RECOVERY

Decompression after a hard
day

PREDICTABILITY

Calming for anxious brains

FRIENDSHIP

Social belonging

OLD QUESTION

"How do I get my child **off** screens?"



BETTER QUESTION

"What is the screen **doing** for my child?"

Once we understand the need, we're much more likely to find a helpful solution.

HOW SCREENS AFFECT SLEEP

- **1. Stimulation** — Gaming increases arousal. Activated brains don't sleep easily.
- **2. Difficult transitions** — Stopping a rewarding activity to immediately sleep is very hard — especially with ADHD/autism.
- **3. Light at the wrong time** — Bright screens delay melatonin and shift the body clock later.

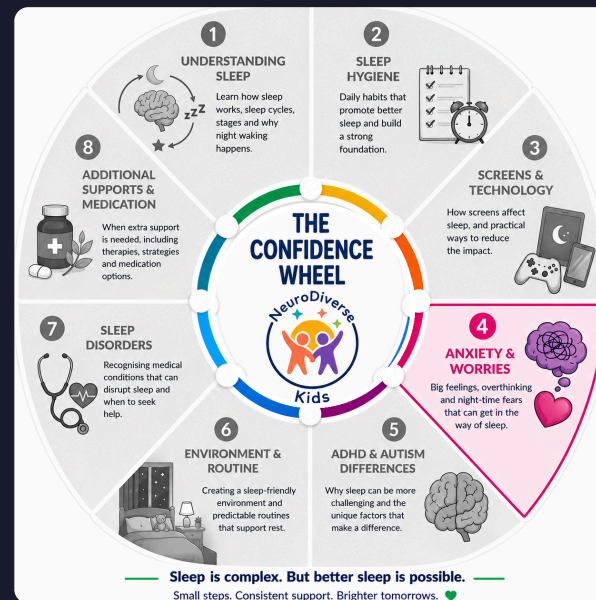
PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES

- **Avoid highly stimulating activities immediately before bed**
- **Build a transition period between screens and sleep** — remember the aeroplane descent
- **Create family agreements, not constant battles** — rules work best when children understand them

SCREENS ARE RARELY JUST
ABOUT SCREENS.

SUB-SPOKE 4 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

ANXIETY & WORRY





WHY NIGHT-TIME IS HARD

NIGHT-TIME IS WHEN THE WORLD GOES QUIET AND WORRIES BECOME LOUD.

During the day, children are busy — school, play, screens, life.

At bedtime, distractions disappear. And worries rush in.

A STORY

"DEATH BY A THOUSAND QUESTIONS."

- "What are we doing tomorrow?"

- "Will Grandma be okay?"

- "What if I can't get to sleep?"

- "What if nobody plays with me at school?"

Every night. Another question. Another cuddle. Another trip to the toilet.

It *looked* like bedtime avoidance.



THE BEDTIME BEHAVIOUR WASN'T THE PROBLEM. THE **WORRY** WAS.

She was frightened — about school, friendships, getting things wrong.
Anxious children rarely need more pressure. They need *understanding*.

A PRACTICAL STRATEGY

WORRY TIME

- **Earlier in the evening** — set aside 10 minutes specifically for worries
- **"What is your brain worrying about tonight?"** — write them down, talk about them
- Some families use a **notebook, a box, drawing, or scrunching worries up**
- The message: **Worries are real. But they don't have to take over bedtime.**



THEY ARE NOT TRYING TO
MAKE LIFE DIFFICULT.

THEY ARE HAVING A DIFFICULT TIME.

SUB-SPOKE 5 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

ADHD & AUTISM DIFFERENCES



AN IMPORTANT REASSURANCE

IF TRADITIONAL SLEEP ADVICE HASN'T WORKED
FOR YOUR CHILD, IT DOES **NOT** MEAN
YOU ARE DOING ANYTHING WRONG.

Sometimes it simply means that your child's brain *works differently*.

ADHD & SLEEP

MANY CHILDREN WITH ADHD HAVE A DELAYED SLEEP PHASE.

- "He's bouncing off the walls at bedtime"
- "She's finally sleepy at ten o'clock"
- "He's exhausted all day — then suddenly comes alive at bedtime"

Their internal body clock often runs later than other children's.



```
child: "My brain just won't stop."  
child: "It's like having fifty tabs open at the same time."
```

THEIR BODY MAY BE IN BED.
THEIR **MIND** IS STILL RUNNING.

Thinking. Planning. Imagining. Remembering. Worrying.

AUTISM & SLEEP

SENSORY DIFFERENCES. PREDICTABILITY. INTEROCEPTION.

- The label in pyjamas. The texture of bedding. A ticking clock. A tiny amount of light.
- Things many of us barely notice can become **enormously significant**.
- A room that feels perfectly comfortable to one child may feel **unbearable** to another.

A STORY

SLEEP WAS FINE AT HOME. EVERY FAMILY HOLIDAY WAS A DISASTER.

New bedroom. Different smells. Different sounds. Different routine.
Once they understood how important *predictability* was, everything changed.

- Familiar bedding. Same routine. Photos of hotel rooms beforehand.

- **Holidays became possible again.**

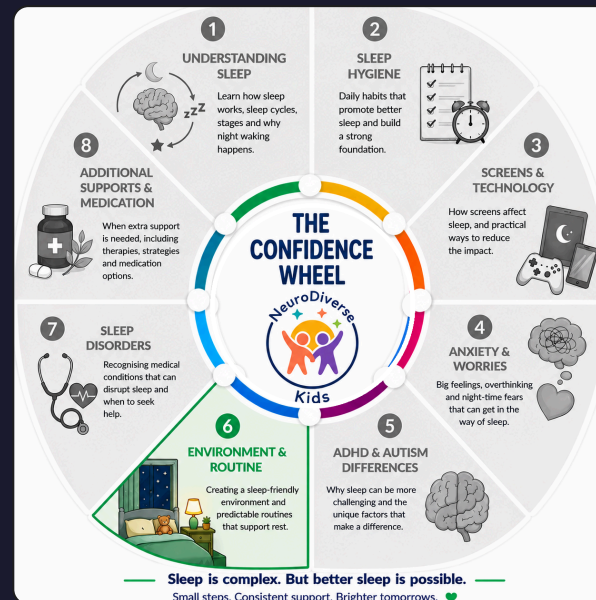
KEY MESSAGE

NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN ARE NOT SIMPLY
TYPICAL CHILDREN WHO NEED
STRICTER ROUTINES.

- More predictability
- More sensory support
- More flexibility
- And sometimes — additional help

SUB-SPOKE 6 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

ENVIRONMENT & ROUTINE





IF I WALKED INTO YOUR CHILD'S BEDROOM
TONIGHT —
WHAT WOULD I **FIND**?

ENVIRONMENT FACTOR 1

LIGHT

- Some children are **extremely sensitive** to light — streetlights, hallway lights, LEDs from chargers
- **Blackout curtains** can make a significant difference for some children
- **Become a detective.** What works for your child may not work for others.

ENVIRONMENT FACTOR 2

NOISE

Complete silence



WHITE NOISE



Loud environments

Fans, white noise machines, rain sounds — experiment with what works.
Some children find silence unsettling. Others find it essential.

ENVIRONMENT FACTOR 3

SENSORY DIFFERENCES

- **Pyjamas:** seams, textures, labels can be profoundly disruptive
- **Bedding:** some need heavy blankets, others find them intolerable
- **Temperature:** most children sleep better in a cooler room
- **Body position:** some need lots of input, others need very little

A STORY

HE COULD HEAR SOUNDS THAT **NOBODY ELSE** IN THE
HOUSE HAD EVEN NOTICED.

Once he started wearing ear defenders and later white noise,
his sleep improved dramatically.

Children are wonderfully different.

Our job is to create the right bedroom for **our child**.



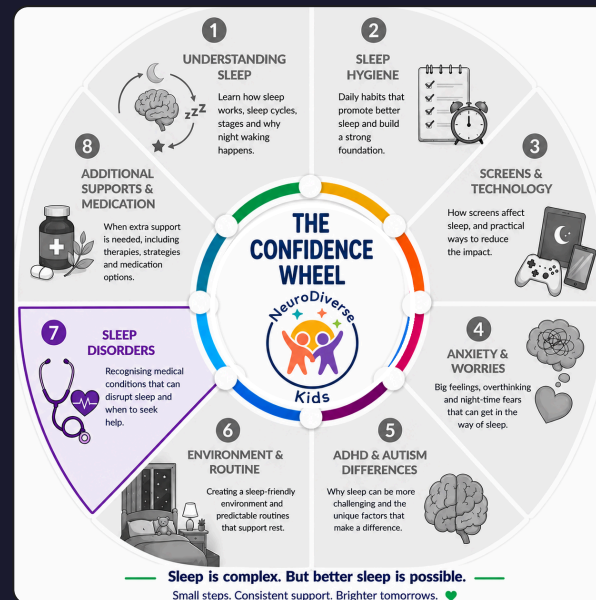
CHILDREN BORROW PREDICTABILITY FROM ADULTS.

The more predictable we make bedtime, the safer many children feel.

Aim for patterns. Aim for consistency. Aim for good enough.

SUB-SPOKE 7 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

SLEEP DISORDERS



BECOME A DETECTIVE

MOST SLEEP DIFFICULTIES ARE **NOT** CAUSED BY SERIOUS MEDICAL PROBLEMS.

However — sometimes poor sleep is a symptom of something else.

And if we miss that, families can spend years trying strategies that were never going to work.

LOOK FOR
THE CLUES

SLEEP DISORDER 1

SLEEP APNOEA

- "He snores like an adult"
- "She's incredibly restless — but still wakes exhausted"
- Heavy sweating during sleep · unusual sleep positions · gasping or choking
- Not every child who snores has sleep apnoea — but **regular loud snoring is not something to ignore**

SLEEP DISORDER 2

RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME

- "My legs won't stay still" · "I can't get comfortable"

- "She's constantly moving in bed" · "He kicks all night long"

- Can be associated with **low iron levels**

- Children with ADHD experience restless legs **more commonly** than other children

SLEEP DISORDER 3

PARASOMNIAS



SLEEPWALKING



NIGHT TERRORS

CONFUSIONAL AROUSALS

SLEEP TALKING

Most parasomnias are harmless and children usually grow out of them.
They can be frightening to witness — but children are usually unaware.

A FAMILY I REMEMBER

THEY CAME WORRIED ABOUT BEHAVIOUR. I ASKED ABOUT SLEEP.

"Oh yes, he snores — but we never thought much about it."

- Irritable · emotional · struggling at school

- Turned out: significant **sleep apnoea**

- Once treated — behaviour, concentration and mood **all improved**

WHEN TO SEEK FURTHER ADVICE

- Your child **snores regularly**
- They appear to **stop breathing** during sleep
- They are **extremely restless** at night
- They seem **unusually sleepy** during the day
- **Frequent night terrors or sleepwalking**
- **Severe and persistent sleep difficulties** despite good routines

SOMETIMES POOR SLEEP ISN'T ABOUT
PARENTING, BEHAVIOUR, OR ROUTINES.
SOMETIMES IT IS MEDICAL.

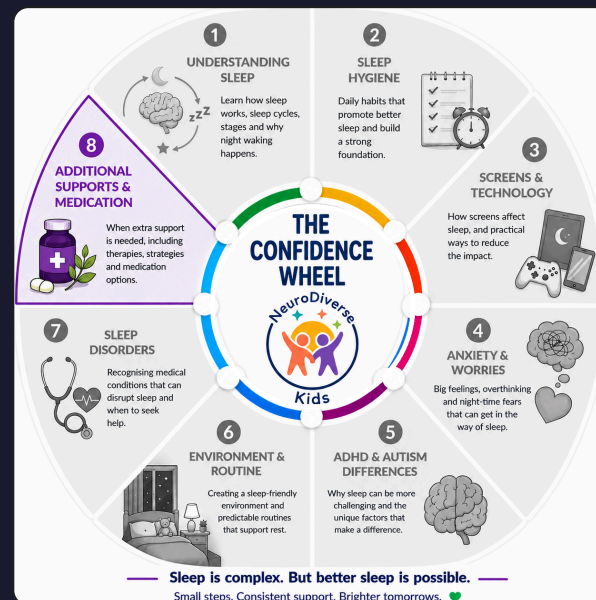
And recognising that can be life-changing.

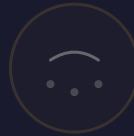
If that's your family — please don't blame yourself.

Children are not bad sleepers. Children experience barriers to sleep.

SUB-SPOKE 8 OF 8 — THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS & MEDICATION





"WE'VE TRIED **EVERYTHING.**"

- You've done the routines
- You've addressed anxiety
- You've adjusted the environment
- You've worked on screens



YOU HAVE
NOT FAILED.

SHOW OF HANDS

WHO HAS EVER FELT **GUILTY**
ABOUT EVEN THINKING ABOUT
MEDICATION FOR SLEEP?

Thank you for your honesty.
You are not alone in feeling this way.

SLEEP IS BIOLOGICAL.

Some children need additional support.

And that is absolutely okay.

- "If I was a better parent, my child wouldn't need this."

- **Recognising when additional support is needed is often one of the most important things a parent can do.**

THINK OF IT LIKE EYESIGHT

WE DON'T SAY

"Try harder."

"Everybody else can see —
so you should too."



WE RECOGNISE

The child needs **support**.

Perhaps they need glasses.

Sleep can be **very similar**.

THE MOST COMMON SLEEP MEDICATION

MELATONIN

- **Not:** a sleeping tablet that switches children off
- **Is:** a hormone messenger — "night-time has arrived, prepare for sleep"
- Particularly helpful for children with **ADHD and autism**
- Another **spoke on the wheel** — another tool, another accommodation

NEEDING HELP IS NOT FAILURE.

USING SUPPORT IS NOT FAILURE.

ACCEPTING THAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS SOMETHING DIFFERENT IS NOT
FAILURE.

A CHILD I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER

LESLEY. AUTISTIC. NON-SPEAKING. A VERY EXHAUSTED FAMILY.

- Waking repeatedly during the night
- Parents. Siblings. The whole family. Exhausted.
- The family were **already doing so many things well** — routines, sensory needs, consistency

WE INTRODUCED MELATONIN.

Not because anybody had failed.
But because Lesley needed another layer of support.

- Sleep was not suddenly perfect
- But it was **better**
- **And sometimes, better is life-changing.**



WHEN SLEEP IMPROVES,
CONFIDENCE GROWS.

”

"ASKING FOR HELP IS NOT A SIGN
OF WEAKNESS.
IT IS A SIGN OF WISDOM."



YOU DO NOT HAVE TO
DO THIS **ALONE.**

Support exists. Hope exists. Things can improve.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

THE SLEEP CONFIDENCE WHEEL



Eight sub-spokes. Eight areas. Eight possible starting points.

I DON'T WANT YOU TO LEAVE TODAY
THINKING YOU NEED TO **FIX ALL EIGHT.**
YOU DON'T. **DON'T TRY.**

In fact, I'd strongly encourage you not to.



PICTURE THAT CHILD AGAIN.

Their face. Their smile. Their personality.
The things that make them uniquely them.



WITHOUT OVERTHINKING IT —
POINT TO THE SPOKE THAT FEELS
MOST RELEVANT TO YOUR **FAMILY RIGHT NOW.**

1

NOT EIGHT SPOKES. ONE.

That's your starting point.

CONFIDENCE IS BUILT ONE SMALL STEP AT A TIME

- One calmer bedtime
- One new routine
- One conversation
- One less argument
- One extra hour of sleep

EXHAUSTION

▶ ONE SPOKE

▶ AT A TIME



CONFIDENCE

FROM EXHAUSTION TO CONFIDENCE.

Not in one giant leap. One spoke at a time.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE TODAY

YOUR NEXT STEP

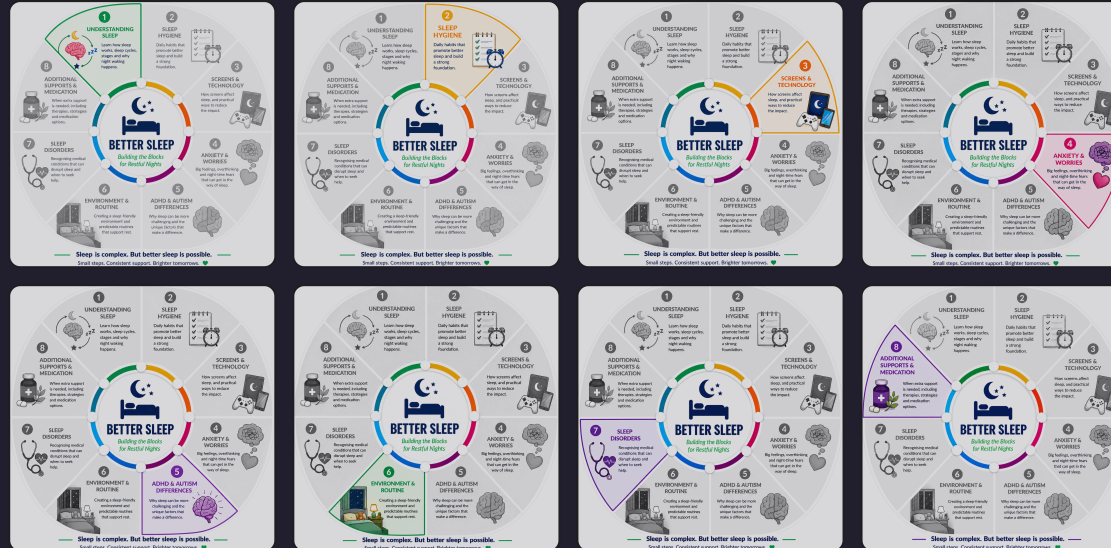
One small favour.



SCAN THE QR CODE

GET YOUR FREE SLEEP RESOURCES

Tell me which sub-spoke feels most relevant to your family right now. You'll receive personalised free resources to get started.



or visit neurodiversekids.co.uk/resources

YOUR SLEEP CONFIDENCE STARTER PACK

- The Sleep Confidence Wheel
- A bedtime routine planner
- A sleep diary
- A bedroom environment checklist
- Practical sleep strategies matched to your chosen spoke
- Guidance on when to seek further help



SCAN TO DOWNLOAD

THERE IS NO OBLIGATION.
NO PRESSURE.
JUST SUPPORT.

By telling me what your family needs, you'll also help shape
the future resources I create.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

IF YOU FORGET
EVERYTHING EXCEPT ONE THING



CHILDREN ARE NOT BAD SLEEPERS.
CHILDREN EXPERIENCE **BARRIERS TO SLEEP.**

When we understand those barriers, we respond differently.

With curiosity. With compassion. And with hope.

YOUR CHILD DOESN'T NEED A **PERFECT** PARENT.

- **Somebody who keeps showing up**
- **Somebody who keeps learning**
- **Somebody who keeps trying**
- **Somebody who believes things can improve**
 - even after difficult nights

THOSE PEOPLE
ARE SITTING RIGHT HERE.

PLEASE BE **KIND** TO YOURSELVES.

- Celebrate the small wins

- Aim for progress, not perfection

- **Sleep won't solve everything** — but for many families, it is the first domino

WHEN SLEEP IMPROVES,
CONFIDENCE GROWS.

ONE SPOKE AT A TIME.



DR HARRY WOODWARD — PAEDIATRICIAN

THANK YOU

It has been a privilege to spend this time with you.
I wish you and your family every success on your journey
from chaos to confidence.



FREE RESOURCES
neurodiversekids.co.uk/resources