**1. What is golden hour?**

Hi, I'm Karen and I’m a sleep practitioner working for Sleep Right in Northampton. I'm also a parent of a 14-year-old son with Down syndrome who has kept me very sleep deprived over the years.

Hi, I'm Kerry and I'm a sleep practitioner working in Leeds.

This is the Sleep Right podcast. In this episode, we're talking about what is the golden hour.

To find more information and support for families of disabled children check out the Scope website at <scope.org.uk/sleep>

Hi Kerry

Hi Karen, are you OK?

Yes, I’m really well, thank you. So today we're going to chat about what a really good bedtime routine looks like, otherwise known as the golden hour. The reason for this is that we want to promote the production of a natural hormone produced in the pineal gland in the brain known as melatonin. And melatonin needs cues to be able to be released and when enough of that has been released, that can make us sleepy and ensure that we're falling asleep at night. And then through the night, it will continue to be produced.

So, Kerry, what do we need to have in place?

I think the golden hour is really good place to start. Gradual steps to the golden hour but have it as a very calming time. I think the whole point of golden hour is linked obviously to the name. I think the bedtime routine needs to last around an hour. And in this hour, that's when to introduce activities to relax the brain and start the production of the natural melatonin.

So, I think creating the calm environment is crucial in the first instance, and when we're talking to parents about where the bedtime routine is going to take place. For example, if it's in the lounge, then the first thing they need to be doing is ensuring that the brain has the cue to see that the environment is changing. So, close the curtains and reduce the lighting.

Then screens - all screens should be turned off. Turn the television off. TVs need to be turned off fully, not just left on in the background, even if the child's not watching them.

Yeah, and that's an interesting point. Because some parents who will say, well it's okay, because I've turned the TV off from CBeebies and now my child is not interested in watching it. But however, even if they're not looking at it, their brain is still being stimulated from that. So, we have to really impress upon parents that it actually has to go off completely.

Yes, and I think that in that time as well, it's a really good time for re-connection with the parent and child and siblings, if there are siblings at home. I get a lot of parents say to me that when they've introduced the golden hour and really focused on activities in the golden hour, it's brought family reconnection time back together and they’ve really enjoyed it.

Yes, absolutely. And I think it is really important if you've got a large family and there are lots of children and there's one particular child who does have sleep issues and you know, may have a diagnosis of autism for example that they need may that one-to-one time away from the other children, just to be able to get that time with their parents, just to be able to calm down. That's why I think it's such a special hour to have before bedtime.

Once we've set the scene in the room, we need to think about perhaps a supper snack. Now, it's not essential. We're not going to suggest that you force feed your child if they're not hungry. But of course, what it will do is potentially take away any bedtime delaying tactics of “I'm hungry” or “I'm thirsty” going up to bed. So, if you can introduce that as part of the routine, and they on they want a snack, then it's important that they're being offered the right things really.

Yes, because I know some children eat their evening meal at teatime and then don't have anything else to eat or drink before bed. That varies again on family routine and the time of evening meals because some families don't eat to until late for whatever reason, but some children eat when they're getting in from school and then they don't eat any other food or drink and then, like you say, they use that as a delaying tactic.

Yeah, absolutely. Some of the common foods you know there is a podcast later on where we'll talk about sleep inducing foods, but I think for now we’re just touching on the fact that we're looking at giving foods that aren't high in sugar content or caffeine that can stimulate more.

And then we need to think about a pre-bedtime activity, don't we?

We always recommend hand-eye co-ordination activities. They are really good for calming the brain or just anything that can be obviously away from a screen and just trying to be calm. So, I recommend quite a lot of yoga or relaxation activities, which I know that there is a podcast coming later in the series around relaxation, I recommend this quite a lot.

Usually screens are being turned off and we're introducing a golden hour bag or box which has motivating activities for the individual child. So, we will often speak to parents what the child's interested in, and then we try and pick some activities that we could introduce into a golden hour bag or box. They don't have to buy it. If we can get the child making it, it’s their special box or bag. Maybe use an old pillowcase or an old shoe box, and it only comes out in the golden hour with their activities. Then they can sit together to do.

Yes, it's a cracking idea! And I think what's good about it is that parents can preload it with suitable activities so you know there's not going to be anything really overstimulating in there, they're all going to be appropriate for that winding down time. A lot of my parents and children that I support children are in primary school, they especially love kinetic sand seems to be a biggie. Play Doh is another thing, but it's messy so a lot of parents don't want that in their homes. I know I didn't when mine were little.

Mohdoh is brilliant. Yes, Mohdoh is a lavender-infused dough, isn't it? Yes, and therapeutic, and it's really lovely. The teenagers tend to go for that more. You have to think about our older children, well the teenagers, the activity they might use for their calming down time might be a bit of drawing or card games. It just depends on what they're particularly into really and often it's quite difficult because when you're talking to parents about what should they be doing? Once the screens have gone. Sometimes they get a bit stuck.

Sometimes their parents worry how their child will respond to having no screen without actually turning the screen off, which actually when they do it, they get quite a shock that they're actually okay and tolerating it. There's got to be some activity that replaces that screen that is actually interesting to the child and motivating them to turn it off.

Yeah and I think that one of the reasons for this is because the child is so loving the fact they're getting that one-to-one time with the parents, which sometimes, like I said before, they're battling for a lot of the time because you know other brothers and sisters are in the house.

Another good element of the bedtime routine is potentially a bath or shower before bed. The reasoning behind this is that we need to increase body temperature and then once we get into bed and we’re cooling down that will allow for another surge of melatonin so it's really helpful. As an alternative we can warm up pajamas, can’t we?

Yes, on the radiator or putting a hot water bottle inside the bed at the beginning of the golden hour and then you take it out as the child goes into bed. It’s something that will help with them increasing body temperature.

These suggestions are obviously individual to the child needs because some children, I guess, might not like heat or a hot bed but we do say that we need to increase the temperature and then obviously decrease it to fall asleep.

Again, going back to the bath and shower. Sometimes bath time is a meltdown, and we don't want that anxiety rising by putting the bath in the golden hour if that child's upset and gets angry at being put in the bath - or hair washing makes them have a melt down - and then they struggle to go to sleep. So, we then suggest that they have bath time (if they have to have a bath or daily care) is out of the golden hour and then calm down after.

And I guess that's why we realize that there is no one size fits all. And that every advice we give is bespoke to the individual child's sleep issue at that time. Every child is very different.

So, them we're then getting into bed and then looking at bedtime stories, making sure the environment and the scene is set in the bedroom, low lighting toys, packed away, all set, lovely and relaxing and ready. Some children might not want to look at books and I think for bedtime stories, they just need to be careful what the content of the bedtime story is. Try and have a finished point to the story so the child's imagination doesn't continue.

So, once the story or audio book is finished, this is now time to either turn off the lights, if your child can tolerate darkness. If there is any fear or anxiety of the dark, then we would advise to introduce a nightlight that stays on all night.

Some children, going back to maybe noise, some parents do have some white noise played in the room, but again, if a child falls asleep, listening to this, that needs to remain on all night so there's no change in the child's environment.

I would then suggest that the parent says a set bedtime phrase like good night, give the kiss and cuddle and then leaves the room preferably. There are further strategies for this that we can advise around.

So, I think that really sums it up. Just so that everybody knows for their information, this is the first in a series of podcasts that we are recording to try and give some support to parents around sleep. The others will be about a relaxing bedroom environment, sleep inducing foods, pre-bedtime activities, bedtime anxiety and tips to aid relaxation.

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