Hi, I'm Gina I'm a sleep practitioner and I work in Peterborough. I'm the mum of 2 teenagers, one of which has complex needs.

Hi, I'm Karen and I work as a sleep practitioner over in Northamptonshire. And I'm also mum to a 14-year-old son with Down syndrome.

This is the Sleep Right podcast. In this episode we're talking about a relaxing bedtime environment.

You can find out more information and support for families of disabled children at <scope.org.uk/sleep>

What is a relaxing bedroom environment?

Well firstly it's important to understand that children really benefit from having a calm bedroom environment in order to promote relaxation and help them get a good night's sleep. And it's also important to spend some time planning your child's bedroom to make sure that it is relaxing rather than too stimulating. There are many products on the market these days that can actually overstimulate a child. And then that could possibly lead them to develop sleep associations that then can't be maintained through the night, such as overstimulating lighting or maybe projection, maybe projecting stars onto the ceiling and things like that so it's really important that you look really carefully into it all.

I think it's being mindful to remember that as the parent you make the choices. So, one of the things I sometimes have heard is “my child really likes fire engines”. So then they go and they spend a lot of money on a really flash bed, lots of murals and stickers on the walls and really bright busy colours which aren't great for a lot of the kids that we work with. I always liken it to walking into a supermarket. There's just so much information to have to process about your environment that it's possibly better to start at that level. And you think, “Okay, what do I actually want to promote?”

Yeah, absolutely and I think these days children are so influenced by the world around them and you've got so many little football fans and they want their Man United reds and their Chelsea blues and they want everything matching. As parents we love our children unconditionally and we want to make that bedroom beautiful for them and we want everything to match. And that possibly is fine when you've got a child who sleeps beautifully but when there is a sleep problem, that's when you realise that potentially that has to be stripped back.

When we talk about colour scheme, we talk about decorating in the more neutral calming colours because the bright colours, the reds and the blues, can be overstimulating. So, it's really important to really tone it down as much as possible.

Looking at pale neutral colours, obviously on trend at the moment is grey everything, so it works for boys and girls, but I think it's just thinking you want a pale neutral environment. You don't want really busy wallpapers and things like that. You need to be mindful of what you're putting on the walls as well, so we always say if your child's really into something, or you want to have a feature wall, or you want to have lots of posters and pictures and things like that, always do it on the headboard end so it's not something that they're looking at throughout the night. Because sometimes starting off they might love a poster of a particular character or something and then roll on a few months and I've had some children say that “the eyes are following me around the room” so it's just being future proof. Little is best rather than more and, especially if you've got climbers, do you really need to have a lot of furniture in the room?

And also, it's important to think about what the window looks like. We need to have as darkened environment as possible in the bedroom to support a good night's sleep and also to help produce that melatonin.

Blackout blinds can be really helpful, particularly during the summer months when you know it's much lighter later on in the evening, you can actually get Gro blinds that Velcro on to the windows.

There are so many different options that you can use these days that aren't too expensive, so compromising on cheap linings on thinner curtains can also really help.

One thing to consider also though if your child is afraid of the dark or maybe has a visual or hearing impairment, they might actually find a completely blackened room makes them more anxious. In those circumstances then you know parents can choose a nightlight with a soft glow that can then be safely left on all night.

You want to aim for like a golden or a white very light type of thing, that's the kind you want. I think one of the things that I would probably steer away from is the disco light bulbs. I’ve been in some bedrooms that are better than sensory rooms that I've been in.

I think we can all be limited for space, and I think sometimes even if you have all the sensory stuff, it's about having a time and a place, and I would always associate it with a different room of the house rather than the bedroom.

I think if you choose a night-time light that needs to stay on all night. Lava lamps are lovely, and they can be brilliant and calming but equally they're probably not best left on all night as they tend to get quite hot.

That's right and there's also the risk that some children may break them. We do have some children who might have quite severe behavioural issues, and everything may get broken in the room. So, parents will only really have the main ceiling lights and the bulbs in the ceiling light can be quite bright even with a low wattage bulb. Sometimes it can be quite bright so we would recommend replacing the normal white bulb with a red or orange bulb and that doesn't then suppress the sleep hormone from being produced quite as much as a white light would do.

I think another thing is just to be mindful of toys. It's great to have toys and that's fine, but I always use the example you know. I wouldn't be able to fall asleep next to an all you can eat buffet so I don't expect a child's going to be able to sleep next to a vast array of toys. And even children that don't necessarily get out of bed and play with the toys can still lie in bed and use their imaginations. So plastic stacking boxes tucked under the bed or even covered with a cloth is brilliant. That's really going to block out all that kind of environmental factor where it could be quite busy.

Another thing to consider is the temperature of the room. If the room is too warm that can disrupt sleep and if it's too cold, it could be waking the children up in the night. Ideally, the bedroom temperature should be around 16 to 18 degrees. There are products on the market that are available, we can't particularly recommend anything, but there are different products to give you a guide room temperature

And something to think about as well, which kind of ties in with room temperature, if you've got a child who's a really active sleeper, so even when they're asleep they're constantly moving around, it's thinking about they might be kicking the covers off, that could be then waking them up and especially at 3 in the morning when your body temperature is at its absolute coldest.

So, something to think about is does your child like that feeling of being cocooned, almost like being swaddled? Some babies wear sleeping bags that's brilliant for that. Other things to think about is a flat sheet put over the top of a duvet and tucked in tight on both sides gives a feeling of a weighted effect without the cost of a weighted blanket, but equally it can stop the covers actually being kicked off the bed at the same time.

Yes, definitely. And some children who also like the cocooning effect but without the actual pressure might like to have a bed tent or a canopy over top of them, that can often really help too.

I think what's really important, just as a summary with all this because I think we've covered absolutely loads, is to remember that the bedroom should be a place that is a positive environment. I think for parents it’s important not use the bedroom as a place that child will be sent as a sanction, because that then can then turn it into a negative environment and that is not going to turn into a positive association to allow for relaxation for sleep.

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