



# Sleep Tips for kids with Sensory Issues

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**Putting a child who has sensory-based issues to sleep** can often (if not always) be a challenging part of the day. Not all sleep behaviours are the result of bad habits which are referred to as *behavioural*. Sometimes children have difficulty calming their nervous system and this is a biological or *sensory* problem. For these children, sometimes even the process of being expected to calm can produce its own kind of anxiety.

It takes compassion to understand the child's experience and creativity to come up with a plan to help them fall asleep and maintain sleep.

I have found the following tips useful. I hope they can be for you too. Please experiment and remember that as your child changes, the strategies need to change too. It's an evolving process.

✓ A weighted blanket—often kids who seek deep pressure and or movement find a weighted blanket very calming.

Where and how much? Try eBay as there are a few people who make them to order. The cost ranges from \$ 60 to \$100 (Aust \$). Put the words 'weighted blanket' into a search engine and see what you find. Online message boards are a good source of parent recommendations for equipment and suppliers.

OT's often quote the general rule that the weight of a blanket should be around 10% of the child's weight. I think

#### Special points of interest:

- \* Sometimes children have difficulty calming their nervous system and this is a biological or *sensory* problem.
- \* Because each child is unique, what works for one child may not work for another. A tailored approach is a necessity.
- \* If you decide to talk to a Professional about your child's sleep issues please don't feel embarrassed to say how it really is for you—if you feel judged or misunderstood then they are not the right person for your family.

you really need to experiment with the weight as each child will be different. My son's blanket is definitely more than 10% of his body weight, he likes it very heavy but he can still easily kick it off if he doesn't want it on him.

✓ The old-fashioned 'tight tuck' into bed with multiple blankets is worth trying.

✓ Calming Music. Again every child will be different with what they find is calming. It's good to remember that any type of music may lose its 'power' once your child becomes over-familiar with it.

I had some success with Sleep-Sync, which was constructed by a dad whose own son had difficulty falling asleep and aims to get the sleeper's dominant brainwaves in a more ideal state for sleep. I was surprised that this music actually worked for my son—by 'worked' I mean he appeared to be calmer and more settled. I really do think there is a valid neurological science to this kind of strategy.

White noise recordings, such as rain and ocean sounds have also been useful. There are quite a number of recordings available via iTunes or other online sources. The constancy of these sounds is generally calming to the nervous system and can 'block out' other household noises that some children find alerting.

✓ MELATONIN—what a godsend this was for us! Melatonin is a hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain and helps to regulate what is called *circadian rhythms* or what is more commonly known as awake/sleep cycles. In Australia you need a prescription for Melatonin but this not the case for several other countries, including the USA where synthetic melatonin is widely available.

My son falls asleep in about 20 minutes once the Melatonin effects have kicked in. Previously it took anything from 45 minutes to 2 hours! He still needs rocking and patting during that 20 minutes but he is far calmer and therefore ready for sleep.

✓ The Listening Program. Without a doubt this has been the most significant therapy for improving my son's sleep throughout the night.

It's an auditory method which involves listening to modified music on a twice daily basis. It aims to make the nervous system more organised via the ear-brain connection.

Since using the program, Jed can put himself back to sleep (with me lying beside him) within 5 to 60 minutes of waking up in the middle of the night. He used to be awake anything between 3 to 5 hours—and this was often several nights a week. When he does wake at night he is definitely calmer and appears to understand that it is still time to be quiet and sleepy. I am still very surprised by these changes. . .

You do need an OT trained in the TL Program ([www.thelisteningprogram.com](http://www.thelisteningprogram.com)) to try it with your child. And I can't guarantee the same results but it is worth exploring.



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