

Your Family, Your Rhythm:

Easing back into a different sleep routine after the summer break

By Patricia Flynn, a licensed occupational therapist specialised in Family Sleep

“Many parents worry about how to best manage their child’s, and their own, sleep during the transition back to crèche, school, and work after the summer months. While some children (and adults) seem to adapt to new schedules almost overnight, others will take longer to settle back into early mornings and structured days. Some transitions feel smooth, and others can feel bumpy irrespective of the degree of planning or effort put in ahead of and during the transition. Regardless of how your family experiences the *rentrée*, it’s helpful to know that there is no single “right” way to support sleep during a period of change. Disrupted sleep at times of transition is completely normal (and to be expected in most cases).



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Sleep, Transitions, and Individual Differences

Every family, every child, every transition is genuinely different. What works well one year may feel more difficult the next. If your child’s sleep is unsettled during the first days or weeks of the new school year, this doesn’t necessarily mean that you should have done something differently. It may simply reflect your child’s individual response to change at this moment in time.

Some families find that their children’s sleep naturally adjusts within a few days of returning to their school-time routine. For others, the adjustment takes longer. Parents sometimes find themselves feeling discouraged or comparing their child’s sleep to that of others. It can help to remember that your child’s sleep is shaped by many factors, including personality, developmental stage, sensory profile, physical activity, environment, recent travel and time-zones, and so much more. Most children will recover from periodic disruptions with time and without any reason for concern.

If your family continues to struggle to get back into a sleep routine that meets everyone’s sleep needs, it is important to seek support from your family doctor or an adequately qualified sleep therapist.

There’s No One-Size-Fits-All Sleep Strategy

Many parents wonder whether they should gradually shift their child’s sleep schedule in the days before school starts or wait until the first day and make the change all at once. There’s no clear evidence to suggest that one method is better than the other and both approaches have potential benefits and possible drawbacks.

Some families prefer to shift wake-up times earlier by 10–15 minutes a day in the lead-up to the *rentrée*. This helps those families where there might be a level of anxiety or who prefer a more gradual, predictable change. Others find this adds stress to the end of summer and prefer to “rip off the band-aid” with one big schedule shift on the first day back. Most try a strategy that falls somewhere in between. All are valid approaches. Trust your instincts in terms of what *your* family needs.

If you’re co-parenting or sharing caregiving, it can really reduce night-time stress if you take time to talk together beforehand, at a more relaxed time such as a weekend afternoon, about what’s worked in the past and what hasn’t; what kind of transition is

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likely to feel least stressful for your child and for you; and if there is a compromise that could support everyone's wellbeing, even if the plan isn't perfect. This avoids late-night negotiations and discussions that rarely go well...

Helping the Body Clock Adjust

Our bodies respond to changes in routine, but the adjustment can take time. The good news is that there are ways to support your child's (and your own) internal body clock as it shifts into a new schedule. These include:

- ➔ **Waking up at the same time every day** (even at weekends while transitioning)
- ➔ **Spending time outdoors** (especially in the morning or early afternoon light)
- ➔ **Moving the body while engaging the mind** (through active play or physical activity)
- ➔ **Eating meals at regular school or work-time hours**
- ➔ **Providing a calm wind-down routine in the evening** (that leads to a regular bedtime routine)

These daily time cues, or "zeitgebers" as sleep scientists call them, help signal to the brain and body when it's time to feel alert and when it's time to feel sleepy.

The Emotional Impact of Returning to Crèche, School or Work

In addition to changes in routines, the emotional shift of returning to crèche, school, or work can impact sleep. For children, the end of summer may bring feelings of anxiety around separation or the demands of school/crèche or even a sense of grief over the loss of free time with family. Equally, as adults, it is important to acknowledge that we also are likely to experience a mix of emotions as we have to re-engage with responsibilities at work and home. This is especially true for parents who have had some extra help and support from extended families in their home countries and are now returning to where they have less immediate support. Acknowledging these feelings, and seeking out support or an understanding friend, can facilitate a smoother transition.

Being Kind to Yourself Matters

When we're tired, our bodies often crave carbohydrate-rich, salty and sugary foods in an effort to boost energy. You can prepare ahead of this by stocking the freezer with easily defrosted high-flavour, comforting meals – my family love lasagne, stir-fries, or macaroni cheese. Embrace the cravings knowing that all will be back to normal in a week or two!

Above all, be kind to yourselves knowing that this is a brief time of change. At the start, allow extra time in the mornings, expect a few sleepy meltdowns or slow starts, and try to keep expectations realistic for the first week or so.

And finally...

There is no "perfect" *rentrée* routine, no ideal bedtime (other than the one that suits *your* family), and no one strategy that works for every family. What matters most is recognising your own family's needs and style, making space for flexibility, and trying to lower the stress and not strive for perfection.

Bonne rentrée and sleep well everyone!

You may have attended one of Patricia's very informative free online talks earlier this year - ***Sleep in the first 6 months - you & your baby*** or ***Family Sleep: Balancing Baby, Sibling and Parent Sleep Needs***. Look out for a new date for ***Sleep in the first 6 months***, which will be offered again this autumn. Patricia is also offering BCT members individual ***sleep consultations***. Check out *Twizzit* for more information.

Patricia holds a Masters of Science from her research project synthesising over 5000 multicultural parents' perspectives and experiences of parent-infant sleep. Her approach to supporting sleep is non-judgemental, evidence-based, family-centred and culturally-sensitive.

HAKU

SHIATSU

Saint-Gilles, Brussels



Shiatsu is a Japanese hand pressure technique based on traditional Chinese medicine. It aims to preserve a good energy balance, helping to prevent health disorders in general.



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