

The Ultimate Parenting Hack: Get Enough Sleep

By Dr Justin Coulson

I talk a LOT about how to help parents do better. Explore, explain, empower. Soft eyes. Connection before correction. The list goes on for days.

But there's a parenting hack that works better than anything I can share from a psychological perspective: **get more sleep.**

I know. It's hard. You're busy. The kids wake up at night and interrupt your sleep. And plenty more. I've heard every version of this pushback, and yes, there are a million legitimate reasons parents are sleep-deprived—shift work, babies who think 3am is party time, medical issues, anxiety, insomnia.

There are also some less legitimate reasons: an intense interest in a show and the belief that “one more episode” won't hurt, revenge bedtime procrastination (where you try to stay up late to eek out the downtime you missed during the day), the “productive night-owl” illusion, and simple doom-scrolling.

But here's what's irrefutable: **sleep makes you a better parent.** Not a bit better. Measurably, significantly better. (And sleep also helps your kids do better.)

What the Science Says

A [2019](#) study of 314 mothers found that parents with shorter, later, and more irregular sleep showed observably less positive parenting - even after controlling for their stress levels.

A [2024](#) meta-analysis of 154 studies found all forms of sleep loss reduce positive emotions, increase anxiety, and impair emotional regulation - exactly the skills we need most as parents.

Another [2024](#) study of 44,000 participants found poor sleep correlates with more couple conflict and less partner responsiveness.

You already know this. It's hard to be a good parent or partner when you're running on empty.

The Sleep-Deprived Parent's Playbook

Improving sleep hygiene - for *everyone* in the family - is my ultimate parenting hack. I know this because, recently I was sleep deprived... and I was **not** the parenting expert I'm supposed to be. I was a mess. I was quick to lose my temper. And the whole family suffered for it - as did I.

When you're better rested, you're better equipped to help your kids navigate life. And you're better equipped to navigate life for yourself too.

This is your playbook for getting enough sleep: and note, these tips work for the whole family.

1. Lock in your wake time. Wake up at the same time every day, even weekends. Your circadian rhythm responds better to a consistent wake time than bedtime. This is non-negotiable. It sets your brain's "sleep clock", and ensures that you start releasing those sleepy brain chemicals at the right time each night. Waking up late is like giving yourself jet-lag.

2. Screen curfew: one hour minimum. No phones, tablets, or TV for at least an hour before bed. They stimulate your brain. They get you thinking. They pull you in and keep you awake. Games, social media, and even movies are impacting your sleep timing and your sleep quality.

And if you wake in the middle of the night (because you need the bathroom or because the baby is crying), resist the urge to look at the clock (your phone) because you'll end up doing the late night scroll.

3. Optimise bedrooms. Sleep happens best in a cool, dark, quiet place. Bedrooms should feel like caves, not living spaces.

4. Build sleep pressure during the day. The brain has a counter in it that starts when you wake up. About 14 hours later, it starts releasing hormones and chemicals to slow you down and put you to sleep. Stay out of the way of those chemicals and allow them to build by getting plenty of nature (or at least some green space), physical activity, and minimising screens. The body knows what to do. We just have to avoid interfering.

5. Strategic napping only. No naps after 2:30pm - they kill nighttime sleep drive. If you or the kids must nap, keep it under 60 minutes and early in the day. (Obviously this time limit doesn't apply to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. But the late afternoon cutoff is for everyone!)

6. Caffeine cutoff: 2pm. Caffeine has a half-life of 5-6 hours. That 3pm coffee is still in your system at 9pm. Switch to decaf after lunch - or better yet, water.

7. Wind-down routine. 15-30 minutes of calm activity signals to your brain that it's time to sleep. Reading, gentle stretching, or a warm shower all work. Make it consistent - for you *and* the kids.

The Bottom Line

Getting enough rest isn't just a dream - it's the foundation of not losing your sheet with the kids.

Start with one change tonight. Pick the easiest win. Your family will notice the difference before you do.



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