

Circadian-Friendly Home Routines

Simple, science-backed routines for the whole family, from Circadian Nest Nursery.

Your child's body runs on a 24-hour clock. It's set by what they see and feel during the day — bright light in the morning, time outside, calm and dim light in the evening. When the clock is well set, your child sleeps deeper, settles easier, and is calmer during the day. When it's out of sync, almost everything else gets harder.

This guide is one half of the picture. During the day at the nursery we do the bright-light, outdoor-time, real-daylight half. The routines below are your half — the evening, the bedtime, the dark sleep room. The two halves together give your child a full 24-hour rhythm.

Young children are **much more sensitive to light than adults**. Recent research shows preschoolers' melatonin (the body's sleep hormone) is suppressed by 80% or more by ordinary household lighting in the hour before bed — and stays low long after the lights are off. That's why the routines below matter so much for under-5s specifically. Small changes have an outsized effect.

Quick rule of thumb

Bright in the morning. Outside in the day. Dim in the evening. Dark for sleep. Get those four right and almost everything else takes care of itself.

1. Morning — your most important hour

- **Open the curtains the moment you're up.**

Bright daylight is the strongest signal that the day has begun. It anchors your child's clock for the next 24 hours.

- **Step outside, even for ten minutes.**

The garden, doorstep, or school run all count. Outside light is around 100 times brighter than indoor light, even on a grey day.

- **Eat breakfast in natural light if you can.**

Pull up the blinds rather than rely on the kitchen overhead.

- **Skip morning screens.**

Sunlight does the wake-up job better. The longer you delay screens, the calmer mornings tend to feel.

2. Daytime — get outside

- **Aim for 1–2 hours outside, broken up across the day.**

Outdoor time is the single most powerful thing you can do for your child's sleep, mood and eyes. It's the most consistent finding in the research.

- **Go outside even when it's overcast.**

A cloudy UK day is still around 100 times brighter than indoor lighting.

- **Daylight before screens, not after.**

If there's going to be screen time, save it for after outdoor time. The order matters.

3. Evening — limit artificial blue light

This is the section most parents have never heard, and it might be the most important. Modern lighting and screens emit a lot of **blue light**. Your child's brain reads blue light as "it's daytime — stay alert." That signal blocks the release of **melatonin**, the hormone that makes sleep happen. Melatonin is more than just a sleep hormone — it also supports the immune system, acts as a powerful antioxidant in the body, and helps the brain do its repair work overnight. Protecting it matters.

The simplest rule: from about an hour before bedtime, treat the home like the sun has already gone down. Dim, warm, low. Here's how to get there with what you already have:

- **Lamps and floor lights, not overheads.**

Light from low down feels biologically like firelight. Light from above feels like noon. Your child's body reads the difference.

- **Warm bulbs over cool ones.**

Look for "warm white" or 2700K or lower on the box. Avoid "daylight" and "cool white" bulbs in evening rooms.

- **Red or amber light is best for evening.**

Red and amber wavelengths affect melatonin far less than blue or white. A red or amber lamp in the bedtime routine is much kinder than a normal bulb.

- **Candles for the bath or bedtime story.**

Candlelight is gentle, low, warm, and almost zero blue. (Use safely, away from hands.)

- **No screens for the hour before bed — ideally two.**

Even one evening of pre-bed phone or tablet use shortens children's sleep and dents next-day attention. The effect is bigger in younger children.

- **If a screen is unavoidable, dim it and warm it.**

Most phones and tablets have a "Night Shift" or "Reading Mode" that strips blue light. Turn it on permanently for evening use.

- **Avoid bright bathroom strip-lights at teeth-brushing.**

A brightly-lit bathroom right before bed is one of the most common sleep saboteurs in family homes. Switch to a softer lamp if you can.

4. Sleep — dark, cool, consistent

- **Make the room properly dark.**

Children sleep deeper in true darkness. Blackout blinds are worth the investment — research shows even very low light at night affects the body clock.

- **Cool, quiet, calm.**

Aim for around 16–20°C. Slightly cool supports better sleep.

- **If a night light is needed, make it dim and red.**

Red light affects the body clock far less than white or blue. Cheap red bulbs are easy to find.

- **Same bedtime and wake time, weekends included.**

A regular rhythm beats a long Sunday lie-in. Consistency is more powerful than total hours.

5. And for you, too

These routines work just as well for adults — and modelling them is one of the strongest things you can do for your child. They watch what you do, not what you say. Open your own curtains. Get outside. Dim your evening. Put your phone down. Your child's nervous system reads yours.

What we do — and where you come in

Our part of the rhythm covers the day. We **maximise outdoor time** (the strongest single signal to a child's body clock), keep **windows and blinds open** to let real daylight in, use **red-spectrum lighting during nap and rest** to protect children's melatonin while they sleep, and run **calm, consistent rhythms** so children's bodies know what to expect. The home routines in this guide pick up where the nursery day ends — together they form a full 24-hour circadian environment for your child. We don't expect families to do all of it. Pick what fits.

*This guide accompanies our research summary, **What the Research Says**, available at circadiannest.co.uk.*

This guide is general educational information based on peer-reviewed research, not medical advice. For specific concerns about your child's sleep, behaviour or development, please speak to your GP, health visitor or paediatrician.