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Less Medicine. More Prevention. Real Food. Healthy Habits.

THE POWER OF SLEEP & CHILDREN'S IMMUNITY

A Parent's Guide to Children's Gut Health,
Immunity and Wellbeing



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This guide is intended for educational and informational purposes only. The information provided is not medical advice and should not be used as a substitute for professional medical evaluation, diagnosis, treatment, or recommendations from your physician, pediatrician, or another qualified healthcare professional.

Every child and every adult has unique nutritional needs, medical conditions, health history, lifestyle factors, and personal circumstances. For this reason, always consult your physician, pediatrician, or another qualified healthcare professional before making significant changes to your diet, lifestyle, or supplement routine, especially for children, pregnant or breastfeeding women, individuals with chronic health conditions, or those taking prescription medications.

The information presented in this guide is based on the best available scientific evidence at the time of publication, together with my professional education, training, and personal experience. It is intended as general educational guidance and should not be interpreted as individualized medical or nutritional advice. Recommendations related to nutrition, lifestyle, and supplements should always be considered within the context of your own health needs and discussed with your healthcare provider when appropriate.

Individual results may vary depending on age, health status, genetics, medications, lifestyle, and many other individual factors. Because nutrition science is constantly evolving, recommendations may change as new high-quality evidence becomes available.

References and source links are provided throughout this guide for readers who wish to explore the research in greater detail. I encourage you to continue learning, ask questions, and work together with your healthcare provider to determine what is most appropriate for you and your family.

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A Letter from the Author

Dear Parents,

Hi, I'm Dragana — a Wellness Specialist, Certified Pediatric Nutrition Professional, and NASM Certified Sports Nutrition Coach, passionate about helping moms feel more confident in nourishing themselves and their families through evidence-based nutrition and simple, sustainable habits.

After moving from Europe to the United States, adapting to a completely different culture, food environment, and approach to health felt overwhelming at times. As a mother of two girls, I wanted to better understand how to support my children's immunity, overall health, and wellbeing through nutrition and lifestyle.

That personal journey inspired me to continue my education in pediatric nutrition and wellness while combining professional knowledge with real-life experience as a mom.

Through my work with families and wellness education, I've seen how powerful sleep, nutrition, movement, outdoor time, and healthy daily routines can be for supporting a child's immune system and long-term health.

This guide was created to talk about the connection between sleep and children's immunity in a simple, realistic, and warm way — and about how important quality sleep truly is for a child's health, recovery, behavior, and overall development.

Today, more than ever, children are surrounded by screens, constant stimulation, and a fast-paced lifestyle, which is why quality sleep often becomes a neglected part of healthy habits. Yet it is during sleep that a child's body recovers, regulates important processes, and builds the foundation for a healthier and more resilient immune system.

Through my work with families and wellness education, I have also noticed how confused many parents feel when it comes to children's immunity. Everywhere we turn, we hear about supplements, viruses, "boosting immunity," and endless advice about what parents should be doing to keep their children healthy.

Over time, however, I realized that some of the most important things are often found in simple everyday habits — quality sleep, calming bedtime routines, balanced nutrition, movement, outdoor time, and a slower, more peaceful lifestyle.

In this guide, I wanted to share not only professional information and research, but also part of my personal experience as a mother — with the hope that it may help you look at sleep differently and better understand the important role it plays in children's immunity, recovery, and healthy development.

Warm regards,

Dragana Valuh

Understanding Kids' Immunity

What Is the Immune System?

Before we talk more about how sleep, lifestyle, and everyday habits affect children's health, I would first like to explain, in a simple and easy-to-understand way, what the immune system actually is and how it works.

When we better understand how a child's body naturally protects itself from infections, it becomes much easier to understand why quality sleep, nutrition, movement, and healthy routines are so important for healthy growth and resilience.

The immune system is the body's natural defense system that helps protect your child from viruses, bacteria, fungi, and other harmful germs. It works like an internal protection system that constantly recognizes and fights things that can make the body sick.

In children, the immune system is still developing and learning. That is why it is completely normal for kids to get sick more often, especially when they start daycare or school and are exposed to many new viruses and bacteria for the first time.

The immune system has two main parts:

1. Innate Immunity

This is the first line of defense that children are born with. It reacts quickly and tries to stop germs before they spread through the body. This includes: the skin, the lining of the nose and throat, stomach acid, and special immune cells that attack harmful invaders. You can think of it as the body's first security guard that responds immediately when something harmful enters the body.

2. Adaptive Immunity

This part of the immune system develops over time. Every time a child is exposed to a virus, bacteria, or vaccine, the body learns and remembers how to respond better the next time. The body creates antibodies — special proteins that help recognize and fight infections more effectively. This is one of the reasons children gradually become more resilient as they grow, and why some illnesses may happen only once or become much milder over time.



A Quick Reminder for Parents

It is important to understand that the goal is not for children to never get sick.

Mild illnesses are often a normal part of childhood and help the immune system learn, grow, and build stronger defenses over time.

In the following sections of this guide, we will focus on simple and practical everyday habits that play an important role in supporting your child's immune system — especially healthy sleep and the habits that naturally support it.

We will talk about why healthy bedtime routines begin long before children go to sleep, the importance of creating a healthy sleep environment, and how movement, outdoor time, and daily physical activity can support better sleep and overall health. We will also explore how simple nutrition habits may support better sleep, along with a few natural approaches that may help children relax and develop healthier sleep routines.

The goal of this guide is not perfection or avoiding every illness, but helping build healthier foundations that can support better sleep, easier recovery, and a stronger, more resilient immune system over time.



Sleep & Immunity

A long time ago, when my brother and I were children, life somehow felt simpler and more spontaneous than it does today. We spent most of our days outside — riding bikes, playing with friends, and coming home only after the sun had gone down. Evenings were calmer, without so many screens, noise, and constant stimulation that have now become part of everyday life.

Today, many things have changed. Screens and the digital world have become a major part of childhood, and many children spend less time outside in free play and physical activity. As a result, many children are not naturally tired in the evening, have a harder time relaxing, and often struggle to fall asleep or get the quality sleep they need.

Over time, I realized how important sleep truly is — not only for children's mood and energy, but also for their immunity, recovery, and overall health. That is exactly why I believe it is important to return to simple habits and healthy routines that help a child's body naturally calm down, rest, and recover.





Healthy Sleep Starts Before Bedtime



A long time ago, the only cartoon that was "allowed" in our house during the day was at 7:15 in the evening. I still remember Mickey Mouse, Shoe People, and Popeye the Sailor — it lasted only about fifteen minutes, and shortly after that, we were already in bed, tired from all the carefree childhood activities we had during the day.

Dinner was almost always at the same time, light and unhurried. After that came a bedtime story, lights out, and goodnight kisses. Today, when I think about my childhood, I truly believe that those small routines had a much greater impact on our health than we could understand at the time.

Even though the city where I grew up was quite polluted and many children were often sick, my brother and I did not have many visits to the doctor. Looking back now, I honestly believe my mother deserves much of the credit for that — through simple habits, consistency, and a calm family routine that gave our bodies a sense of safety and rest.

The healthy habits you build with your child today will most likely stay deeply rooted and remembered as something important and comforting many years later. Children may not remember every detail from childhood, but they will remember the feeling of peace, closeness, and routine they experienced at home.

I will honestly admit that there were periods when, as parents, we took the easier route and allowed our girls to watch cartoons in the evening so my husband and I could finish all of our responsibilities and prepare for the next day. We mostly raised our children on our own, and it was not always easy to balance parenting, work, and everyday life.

But we did not give up. Over time, we learned, and through small steps we managed to build habits that eventually became an important part of our family routine.

We slowly began reducing screen time, especially in the evenings, while introducing calmer bedtime activities. Bath time, dim lights, board games like Uno, drawing, reading books, or simply talking together became a way for the whole family to slow down after a busy day.

Children often need much more than simply being told it is "bedtime." They need a sense of safety, connection, and calm so their nervous system can fully relax.

That is why consistent bedtime routines can have a major impact not only on sleep quality, but also on a child's mood, behavior, energy levels, and overall health.¹

¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6587181/>

Creating a Healthy Sleep Environment

I will honestly say that I have personally never been someone who enjoys sleeping in complete darkness. There has always been a small dim light somewhere in the corner of the room. Still, when my brother and I were growing up, complete darkness during sleep was something completely normal, and no one ever complained about it — it was simply part of our routine and the way we were raised.

Today, my husband is probably the person most responsible for our children sleeping in a darker and cooler room, and I am truly grateful for that. I genuinely believe it has contributed to the healthy and restorative sleep they enjoy today.

The environment in which a child sleeps can have a major impact on sleep quality. Ideally, a child's room should be calm, quiet, and free from excessive stimulation before bedtime. Televisions, phones, and other screens should not be part of the sleep environment, as they can make it harder for the nervous system to relax and fall asleep naturally.

Fresh air before bedtime and a slightly cooler room temperature may also contribute to better sleep quality. During the night, the body naturally lowers its temperature to enter a deeper state of rest, which is why an overly warm room may make it harder to fall asleep and can contribute to more frequent waking during the night.²

Today, children receive an enormous amount of stimulation throughout the day — through screens, sounds, activities, and constant information. That is exactly why it is important for the sleep environment and bedtime routines to send the body a completely different message: that it is time to slow down, feel calm, and rest.

A healthy sleep environment helps children feel calmer, sleep more deeply, and supports both their overall health and immune system.



² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10081498/>

Movement, Outdoor Time & Sleep

Physical activity plays a very important role in sleep quality, overall health, and the proper functioning of a child's body. Children are naturally made to move — to run, play, explore, and spend time outdoors. However, modern lifestyles often involve much more sitting, screen time, and time spent indoors than in the past.

When children get enough movement and physical activity during the day, the body naturally becomes tired and transitions more easily into a state of rest and sleep in the evening. Daily activity may also help regulate energy levels, mood, and stress, all of which contribute to calmer and more restorative sleep.³

Spending time outdoors and being exposed to natural daylight also plays an important role in regulating the circadian rhythm — the body's internal clock that controls sleep and wake cycles. That is why daily movement and outdoor time are an important part of healthy habits that support both sleep and immunity in children.

Key Takeaway

Daily movement, outdoor play, and natural daylight are simple habits that support better sleep, healthier development, and a stronger immune system.

Sometimes the best support for children's sleep and immunity is not something we add, but something we return them to — play, movement, and time spent outdoors.



³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/41137907/>

Small Nutrition Habits That Support Better Sleep

Food and nutrition habits can also play an important role in children's sleep quality. While we often think about bedtime routines, screens, and the sleep environment, the way a child eats throughout the day — especially before bedtime — can have a significant impact on how easily they fall asleep and how restful their sleep will be.

Heavy meals close to bedtime, spicy foods, large amounts of sugar in the evening, or products containing hidden sources of caffeine may make it harder for children to fall asleep and can contribute to more restless sleep. On the other hand, a simple and balanced dinner, proper hydration throughout the day, and calmer evening habits can help the body naturally prepare for rest.

In our home, it became a rule that if we have dessert after lunch, that is usually the end of sweets for the day. Over time, we noticed that too much sugar in the evening can affect children's energy, mood, and sleep quality, especially in children who are already more sensitive to stimulation before bedtime.

Dinner does not need to be complicated — often, simple, light, and balanced meals are the best choice for calmer evenings and better rest.

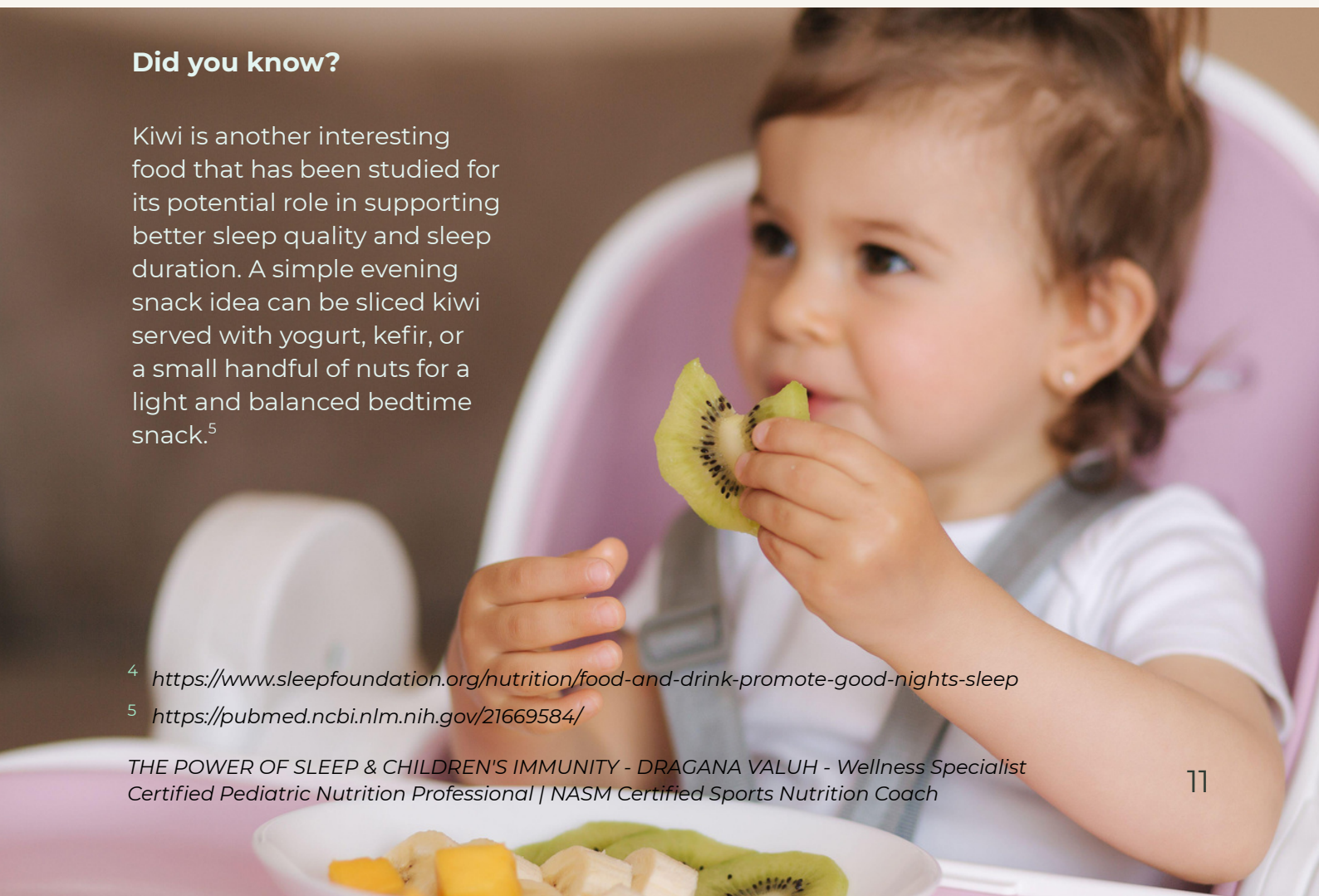
Certain foods naturally contain compounds that may help support relaxation and better sleep. Foods rich in melatonin, magnesium, and tryptophan — such as tart cherries, pistachios, almonds, eggs, and milk — may help the body prepare for rest and support more restful sleep.⁴

Did you know?

Kiwi is another interesting food that has been studied for its potential role in supporting better sleep quality and sleep duration. A simple evening snack idea can be sliced kiwi served with yogurt, kefir, or a small handful of nuts for a light and balanced bedtime snack.⁵

⁴ <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/nutrition/food-and-drink-promote-good-nights-sleep>

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21669584/>



Examples of lighter evening meals or snacks that may support better sleep in children include:

- boiled egg with whole grain toast and a small salad
- cheese with whole grain crackers
- yogurt or kefir
- banana and yogurt smoothie
- turkey or chicken with sweet potato
- polenta with cottage cheese
- a small salad with grilled chicken, turkey, tuna, or boiled eggs
- a whole grain sandwich with hummus and tofu



Simple and balanced meals can often help children feel calmer and more prepared for restful sleep.

Natural Support for Better Sleep

One of my biggest surprises after moving to America and working with families in the wellness space was seeing how commonly melatonin is used for children's sleep. As someone who has always believed in starting with healthy foundations and lifestyle habits first, I was surprised by how commonly melatonin was being used for children.

While melatonin may sometimes help short-term, it does not address the root cause of sleep problems. If we do not support the habits that naturally help children sleep — such as reducing screen time before bed, creating calming routines, managing stress, and supporting the nervous system — sleep challenges often continue to come back.

Over the years, I spent a lot of time reading and learning about children's sleep and natural ways to support it.

Chamomile

Chamomile has traditionally been used to calm the nervous system, relax the body, and support restfulness in both children and adults. It is one of the most researched and gentle herbs that consistently appears in the literature on sleep support.⁶

Research suggests that chamomile may help improve sleep quality, shorten the time it takes to fall asleep, and support longer, more restful sleep. Scientists are still studying exactly how these effects occur.⁷



⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39106912/>

⁷ <https://biomedicineonline.org/article/study-on-the-effect-of-chamomile-extract-on-melatonin-hormone-levels-in-subjects-suffering-from-insomnia-and-anxiety/>

Passion Flower

Passion flower has traditionally been used to promote relaxation and support healthy sleep. Some studies in adults suggest it may help improve sleep quality and support a calmer transition into sleep.⁸

Valerian Root & Lemon Balm

Valerian root is often combined with lemon balm, another herb traditionally used to promote calmness and relaxation. Some studies suggest that this combination may help support relaxation, reduce restlessness, and contribute to healthier sleep in children.⁹

Important

Natural support can sometimes be a helpful addition, but it should never replace the healthy habits that build the foundation for good sleep. In most cases, the greatest benefits come from combining supportive routines, a healthy lifestyle, and, when needed, guidance from a trusted healthcare provider.

Every child is different, and it is always important to speak with your healthcare provider before starting any new supplement or herbal product.

A Note About Valerian Root

Valerian root is generally considered a stronger calming herb than chamomile and is typically used more cautiously in children. It is often included in specially formulated children's products, where it is commonly combined with gentler herbs such as lemon balm.

⁸ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33352740/>

⁹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24837472/>



How Are These Herbs Commonly Used?

These herbs are available in different forms, and the most appropriate option depends on a child's age and individual needs. Always choose products specifically formulated for children and follow the manufacturer's age recommendations and dosing instructions.

- **Herbal teas** – Chamomile tea is one of the most common and gentle options for children.
- **Alcohol-free liquid herbal extracts** – Often formulated specifically for children and commonly combine several calming herbs.
- **Children's syrups** – Many products contain a blend of gentle herbs designed to support relaxation and healthy sleep.
- **Chewable tablets or gummies** – Generally intended for older children, depending on the product and age recommendations.

Can Magnesium Glycinate Help Children Sleep Better?

Magnesium glycinate is a gentle, highly absorbable form of magnesium that is commonly used to support relaxation, healthy sleep, normal muscle function, and the nervous system. **Because it is well absorbed and easy on the stomach, it is often preferred over some other forms of magnesium, such as magnesium oxide.**

Some parents choose magnesium glycinate as part of their child's bedtime routine, particularly during periods of rapid growth, increased physical activity, or occasional muscle cramps. Research suggests that magnesium plays an important role in normal nervous system function and sleep, but the decision to supplement should always be individualized and discussed with a healthcare provider.

Magnesium glycinate is available in several child-friendly forms, including **liquid supplements, chewable tablets, gummies, and powders**, making it easier for parents to choose an option appropriate for their child's age and individual needs.



What About Tart Cherry?

Tart cherries have also attracted attention for their potential role in supporting healthy sleep. Naturally rich in plant compounds and small amounts of melatonin, some studies suggest they may help improve sleep quality and support longer, more restful sleep.

Although most research has been conducted in adults, tart cherry juice and tart cherry supplements have become increasingly popular as a natural option for supporting healthy sleep routines.

Today, tart cherry is available in several child-friendly forms, including 100% juice, syrups, gummies, and concentrates.

For families who would like to try tart cherry juice, choosing 100% tart cherry juice with no added sugar is the best option.

Rather than drinking it immediately before bed, a small serving may be enjoyed after dinner as part of a healthy evening routine, followed by brushing your child's teeth before bedtime.

As with any supplement or functional food, it is important to choose an option that is appropriate for your child's age and discuss any questions with your healthcare provider.



REFERENCE:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22038497/>

Supporting Sleep — Supporting Health

Quality sleep is one of the most important foundations of a healthy immune system. During sleep, the body recovers, regulates inflammation, and produces important immune cells that help fight infections. **When children do not get enough sleep, or when sleep is frequently interrupted and poor in quality, the body can experience higher levels of stress, which over time may affect resilience and recovery.**

Today, more than ever, children are surrounded by constant stimulation, screens, and a fast-paced lifestyle. That is why small everyday habits — such as calming bedtime routines, less screen time, more movement, outdoor play, and a peaceful sleep environment — can have a much greater impact on children's health than we often realize.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31289370/>

My Personal Experience

I will be honest — sleep was not always easy in our family. My younger daughter was a very challenging sleeper from the beginning. Her teeth came in early, she struggled with colic, and there were many periods when sleep felt completely unpredictable.

In fact, many of the things I once said I would never do as a parent, I eventually did. She slept in the stroller, in our arms, during walks, in the car, and sometimes wherever she happened to fall asleep. Like many exhausted parents, there were days when our only goal was to help her get at least some of the sleep she needed.

Looking back now, I realize that I did not know many of the things I shared in this guide. I was learning as I went, making mistakes, trying different approaches, and doing the best I could with the knowledge I had at the time.

If there is one thing that stood out from our experience, it was the power of consistency, patience, and simple calming routines. Chamomile also became one of the natural supports that helped our family the most and remains one of my favorite gentle tools for promoting relaxation and better sleep.

Our Family's Sleep Checklist

Before bedtime, we try to keep things simple:

- ✓ Lights dimmed 1–2 hours before bed
- ✓ No screens before bedtime
- ✓ Warm bath (when helpful)
- ✓ Reading a book together
- ✓ Calm, quiet bedtime routine
- ✓ Bedroom cool, dark, and comfortable
- ✓ Chamomile tea (when appropriate)
- ✓ Tomorrow's clothes and school bag ready (less stress in the morning)
- ✓ Plenty of outdoor play and movement during the day
- ✓ Consistent bedtime every night

Remember: A perfect bedtime routine isn't the goal. Our evenings don't always look like this either, and that's okay. We simply do our best to come back to these habits as often as we can.

Consistency matters far more than perfection, and small habits repeated over time can make a meaningful difference.



A Final Note

Dear Parents,

I truly hope this guide helps you look at children's sleep and the everyday habits that support it from a different perspective.

Throughout this guide, I wanted to highlight one simple but often overlooked truth — quality sleep is not only important for rest, but is also one of the most important foundations of a healthy immune system, recovery, and healthy childhood development.

During sleep, the body carries out many important processes of repair and restoration. It also produces important proteins and immune cells that help the body fight infections. When sleep is consistently inadequate or poor in quality, a child's resilience and ability to recover may be affected over time.

We do not have to be perfect parents to create positive change. Sometimes the small steps we repeat day after day become the foundation of healthier habits that children carry with them throughout life.

We may not be able to prevent every cold, virus, or sleepless night, but we can gradually build habits that support healthier sleep, a stronger immune system, and more resilient children.

If you take away even one new idea from this guide — a calmer bedtime routine, a little less evening stimulation, or one small change that helps your child sleep better and feel better — then this guide has fulfilled its purpose.

Thank you for taking the time to read it, and thank you for caring so deeply about your child's health and wellbeing.

I wish you and your family good health, happiness, and many wonderful moments together.

Warm regards,

Dragana Valuh



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