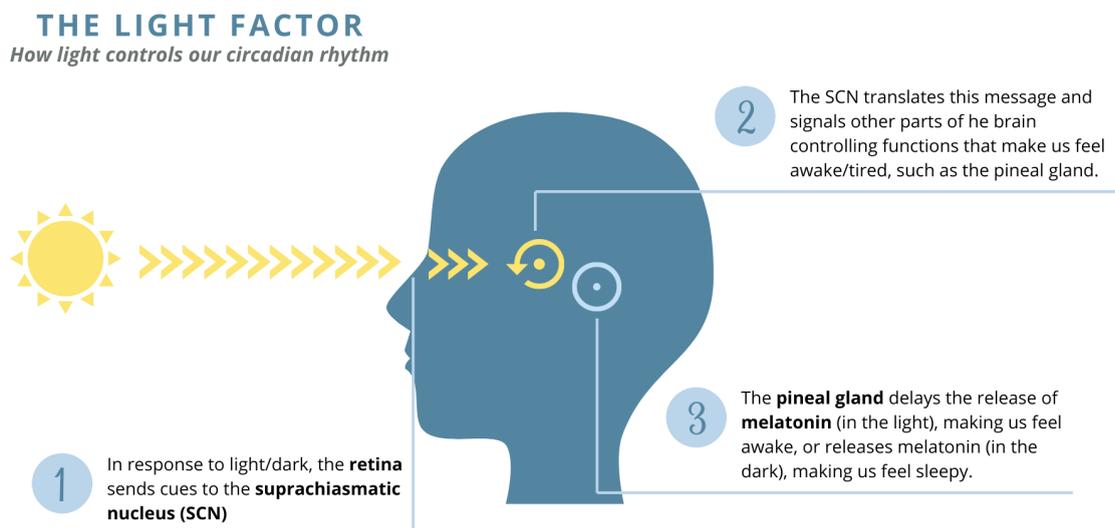


SLEEP ENVIRONMENT (Module 3)

Lesson 2: Dreaming in the dark

As we mentioned in the module on physiology and development, melatonin is one of the key regulatory hormones responsible for making us feel sleepy.

Melatonin is not released constantly all day long. Rather, its release is regulated by the environment. When it's light, melatonin is suppressed. When it gets dark, melatonin is released, which in turn makes us feel sleepy. Healthy adults and children get a surge of melatonin about 30 minutes before they get sleepy.



This means that it's easiest to fall asleep in a dark room. You might be thinking "But wait, my child has fallen asleep in a light room as well." Falling asleep in a light room at the beginning of a nap (or at bedtime for that matter) may be easy enough for some kids, because their sleep pressure has built up enough to aid with falling asleep. However, falling back to sleep after already doing one cycle of sleep is often more difficult if the sleep environment isn't dark enough, and the child is exposed to light as they go through the light sleep phase at the 45-minute mark. Therefore, it's important to adjust your little one's sleep environment to encourage easier settling and longer naps.

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 = bright light, and 10 = pitch black, make your child's room about 8-10 for all naps as well as bedtime.

Black-out curtains are a great investment. Make sure to prevent little cracks of light from creeping in on the sides as this can dramatically increase the light in the room and be enough to make connecting sleep cycles hard for your little one and cause short naps and early morning wake-ups (especially during the spring and summer time).

Achieve more flexibility with a consistent sleep environment

We frequently hear the following questions from parents.

"But won't I be trapped at home with a child that isn't able to nap anywhere except their dark bedroom?!"

We've found both personally and in our 1:1 coaching work with families that having one good long midday nap in a dark bedroom at home actually often leads to more flexible kids long-term. The dark sleep environment during this nap encourages longer, more restorative sleep. This not only helps their biological clocks get into a predictable rhythm, but also prevents overtiredness and supports healthy development and sleep. That means that even if you are out and about one day, or traveling somewhere completely new, your child's body is more likely to stay in the normal rhythm, even if the new place is not quite as dark as at home.

However, if you are keeping your little one's room light in hopes of "teaching her to sleep in any environment", most likely this will back-fire eventually, because it doesn't actually match up to your little one's physiology. You'll most likely end up with a child who doesn't nap well at home or anywhere else. That's why we encourage you to plan for the norm of being home at least for one long nap a day - this helps your little one navigate the exceptions more successfully!

The second common question we hear is:

"Won't making my child's room dark for the naps make them confused between day and night?"

Although day/night confusion is a common concern for parents and may indeed be present in some newborns, it is not caused by a child being allowed to sleep in a dark room at naptime, and is not an issue in babies older than 2 months of age. Go to the FAQ section to learn more.

Encouraging good sleep with the power of light!

As we mentioned in Module 2, exposure to natural sunlight during the day supports the production of the hormone serotonin, which is then converted into melatonin when it gets dark. That's why it is important also to ensure that your little one gets exposure to natural sunlight, especially in the morning (before the midday nap) and afternoon

(before bedtime), to encourage melatonin production and sleep. In areas of the world with little natural sunlight, a light therapy lamp may be helpful during the dark winter months.

On the other hand, exposure to blue light from electronic devices hinders melatonin production, which makes it harder for a child to fall asleep and stay asleep at bedtime, even when in a dark room. Exposure to screens also reduces your child's ability to focus and learn new skills through play, and may negatively impact their emotional regulation. Therefore, we encourage you to limit your child's screen time, especially 2-3 hours before bedtime. This includes passive exposure to screens (TV in the background, parent or caregiver on computer/smartphone/tablet etc), so even if your little one isn't currently getting any active screen time, passive exposure to a TV, computer, or phone screen would still affect sleep.

**We do not recommend the use of night-lights before the age of 1.5-2 years old. For more information on this topic in terms of creating an optimal sleep environment or in relation to night fears, please look at the Troubleshooting and FAQ sections of this course.*

Go to your worksheets now and answer the questions for **Module 3, Lesson 2 - Dreaming in the dark.**