



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 084 | Sleep concerns

Obstructive sleep apnea in children

What it means

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) involves repeated partial or complete blockage of breathing during sleep. It can affect sleep quality, growth, attention, behavior, and learning. It is different from ordinary waking or occasional snoring. A child can have OSA without obesity or obvious daytime sleepiness. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Enlarged tonsils or adenoids are common contributors. Craniofacial differences, obesity, low muscle tone, and some genetic or neuromuscular conditions can increase risk. Nasal obstruction may also contribute. The cause and treatment plan differ across children, especially those with complex medical conditions. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Signs may include regular loud snoring, gasping, pauses in breathing, restless sleep, mouth breathing, and unusual sleeping positions. Daytime irritability, inattention, hyperactivity, or sleepiness may occur. Poor growth can be a concern. Snoring alone does not show how severe breathing obstruction is. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A clinician reviews symptoms, examines the airway and relevant health risks, and may refer to sleep or ear, nose, and throat specialists. An overnight polysomnogram measures breathing and sleep and can establish severity. Symptoms and home videos help the history but do not replace diagnostic evaluation. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Selected children benefit from tonsil and adenoid surgery. CPAP or other treatments may be needed when surgery is unsuitable or obstruction persists. Other causes, including nasal or weight-related factors, receive individualized care. Children need follow-up after treatment because OSA can remain or recur, particularly with associated conditions. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Record concerns about snoring or pauses and share them with the clinician. Follow prescribed treatment and attend follow-up. If CPAP is prescribed, ask for gradual mask support and practical troubleshooting. Do not use home remedies or sleep positioning devices as substitutes for assessment of breathing obstruction.

When to seek help

Breathing pauses with blue coloring, severe breathing difficulty, or difficulty waking the child require emergency help. Persistent snoring and observed pauses warrant prompt medical assessment.

Questions for your care team

- Is an overnight sleep study needed?
- Which treatment fits the cause and severity?
- How will we check whether obstruction has resolved?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss obstructive sleep apnea in children. Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) involves repeated partial or complete blockage of breathing during sleep. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Myth: snoring is always harmless in children. Repeated obstruction can affect health and development.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Polysomnogram: an overnight test recording sleep and breathing.
- Adenoids: tissue behind the nose that can contribute to obstruction.
- CPAP: a device providing air pressure to keep the airway open.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Sleep Apnea in Children: Detection & Treatment

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/sleep/Pages/Sleep-Apnea-Detection.aspx>

[2] Sleep Apnea - Sleep Apnea in Children

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/sleep-apnea/children>

[3] Diagnosis and Management of Childhood Obstructive Sleep Apnea Syndrome

<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-lookup/doi/10.1542/peds.2012-1671>