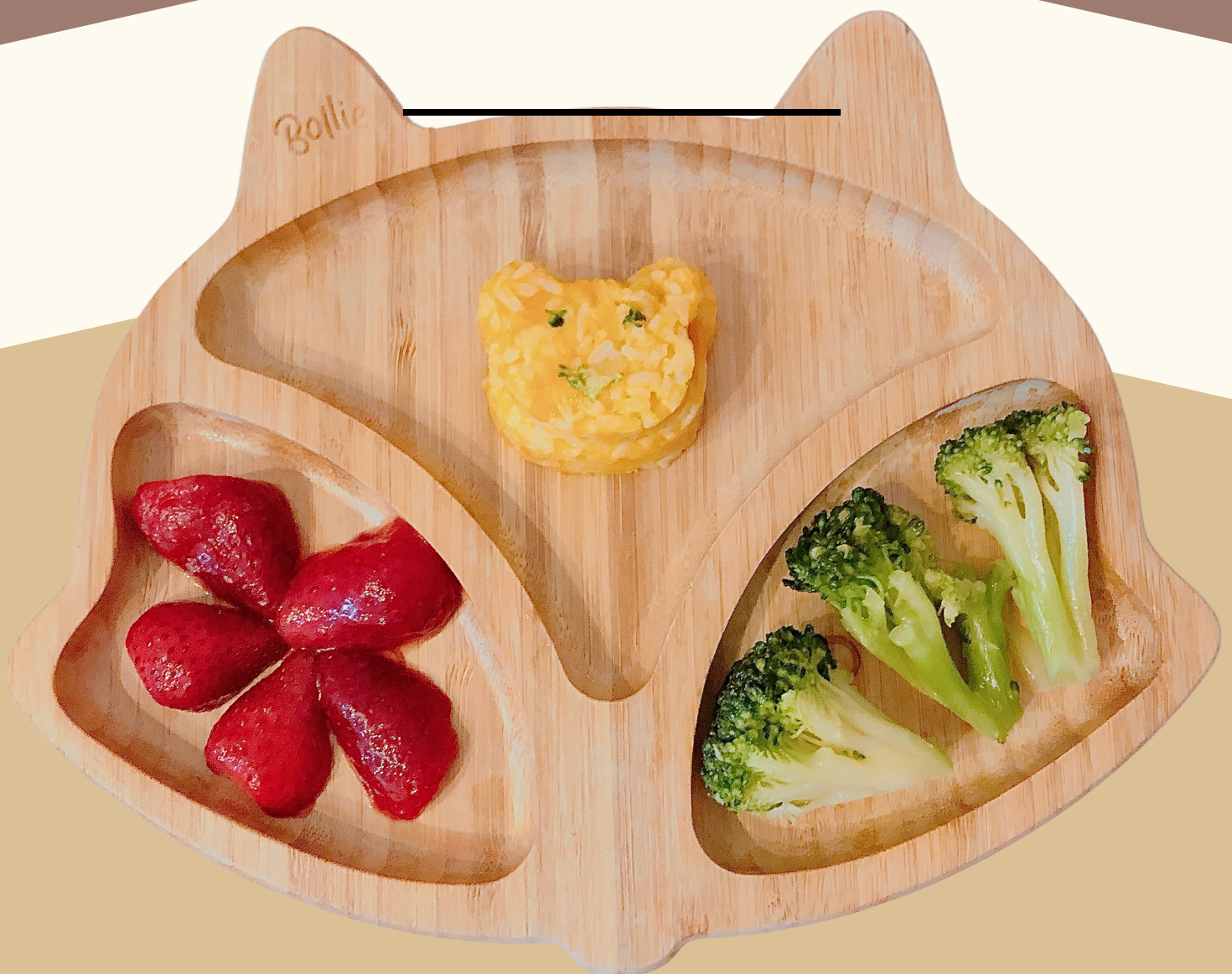


THE NUTRITION & SLEEP CONNECTION: A MINI GUIDE FOR BETTER REST

By Jess Hughes – Holistic & Gentle Sleep Consultant



INTRODUCTION

When we think about improving our baby or toddler's sleep, we often jump straight to routines, sleep environments, or settling techniques. And while those things absolutely matter, sleep is only one piece of a bigger puzzle.

One of the most overlooked, yet powerful, contributors to sleep is nutrition. A well-fed body is a well-rested body. When a child's nutritional needs are met, especially when it comes to iron, protein, and other key vitamins and minerals, their nervous system is better supported, their energy levels are more balanced, and their sleep tends to become more predictable and restorative.

This mini guide is designed to help you understand how food and sleep are connected and what to look out for if things just aren't adding up.

Whether you're starting solids, navigating night feeds, or dealing with tricky wake-ups, these insights can help you feel more confident and informed.

And remember, sleep is a two-part process: your child not only needs to learn how to sleep, but also be physiologically able to sleep well. That's why addressing nutrition is such an important part of the bigger sleep picture.

SOLID STARTS: WHEN & HOW TO INTRODUCE FOOD

Every baby develops at their own pace, but there are some key readiness signs for solids:

- Around 6 months of age (not before 17 weeks)
- Sitting upright in a high chair with minimal support
- Interest in food and mouthing behaviours
- Lost the tongue-thrust reflex (can move food to the back of the mouth)

A gentle introduction:

- Start with lunch around 6 months
- Add breakfast by 7 months
- Introduce dinner by 8 months

Focus on iron-rich foods, varied textures, and slow progression, food before one isn't just for fun, it's part of building a strong sleep foundation.



SIGNS NUTRITION MAY BE IMPACTING SLEEP

Sometimes we overlook nutrition because we assume our children are eating “enough.” But what they eat, and whether their body can absorb and utilize it can dramatically affect sleep quality.

Here are some red flags that nutrition might be playing a role:

- Consistent early waking (before 5:30am)
- Frequent night wakes after 11pm with poor resettling
- Strong dependence on feeding to return to sleep, even if hunger seems unlikely
- Low appetite or food refusal during the day
- Ongoing reliance on night feeds past 9–10 months despite solid intake
- Increased irritability, meltdowns, or clinginess in the afternoon

These signs aren’t always obvious, they can easily be mistaken for “bad habits” or regressions. But often, there’s something deeper going on.



NUTRIENTS THAT SUPPORT BETTER SLEEP

Iron

- Supports dopamine + melatonin production
- Deficiency linked to early rising, restlessness, and increased night waking
- Babies' iron stores drop after 6 months, so diet matters!

Sources: red meat, eggs, lentils, tofu, fortified cereals

Vitamin D

- Essential for sleep consolidation and circadian rhythm alignment
- Deficiency linked to poor immunity, delayed sleep onset, and night wakes

(Supplementation is often recommended — check with your GP)

Magnesium & Zinc

- Calm the nervous system and help with emotional regulation
- Low levels may cause difficulty settling, increased night wakings, and overstimulation

Sources: leafy greens, seeds, oats, beans, meats

Tryptophan + Vitamin B6

- Needed to produce melatonin and serotonin (sleep and mood hormones)
- B6 helps convert tryptophan into usable form

Sources: chicken, turkey, bananas, avocado, salmon, whole grains

TIMING MATTERS TOO

It's not just what your child eats, when they eat matters for sleep too.

- Meals at least 60 mins before sleep
- Too close to bedtime? Their body may be busy digesting instead of winding down.
- Balanced snacks mid-afternoon
- Including protein helps prevent blood sugar crashes and late-day meltdowns
- Avoid sugar-heavy foods before sleep. This includes “healthy” sugars (fruit, rice crackers), pair with fat or protein to balance
- Big bottles before bed (after 10–12 months)
- May disrupt overnight hunger regulation or cause discomfort

Why Lunch Matters Most for Sleep

Of all the meals your child eats in a day, lunch is the most important when it comes to supporting better sleep, especially for babies 7 months and older.

Here's why:

- The nutrients and energy from lunch help fuel the second half of the day, when meltdowns, overstimulation, and overtiredness are most likely.
- A well-balanced lunch can regulate blood sugar, prevent afternoon crashes, and support longer, more restful naps.
- Including iron-rich foods and quality protein at lunch helps promote the production of melatonin and serotonin, the hormones needed for calmness and sleep readiness later in the day.

What to aim for:

- A source of protein (like eggs, lentils, chicken, tofu)
- An iron-rich food (meat, beans, fortified pasta, leafy greens)
- A slow-release carbohydrate (brown rice, oats, sweet potato)
- Some healthy fats (avocado, olive oil, cheese)

MILK FEEDS VS SOLIDS: FINDING BALANCE

Under 12 months, milk is still the main source of nutrition but by 8–10 months, solids should start to take over during the day.

If your baby is:

- Still having multiple milk feeds overnight,
- Not eating well during the day, or
- Relying heavily on feeds for regulation...

...it may be time to gently shift the balance.

My approach:

I never rush weaning or push strict feeding rules. But when night wakes are driven by regulation rather than true hunger, we look at:

- Increasing protein and iron intake at lunch
- Improving solid meal consistency
- Offering water overnight before feeding
- Slowly reducing milk overnight once day intake improves



WHEN TO LOOK DEEPER

Some children may have underlying issues that affect how their body absorbs or uses nutrients, such as:

- Gut health imbalances
- Sensory sensitivities or oral motor challenges
- Undiagnosed intolerances
- Nutritional deficiencies not obvious from diet alone

In these cases, a referral to your GP for blood tests (especially ferritin, vitamin D, B12, and zinc) can provide helpful insight.



SAMPLE DAY: BALANCED SLEEP-FRIENDLY NUTRITION (10-18 MONTHS)

Breakfast:

Scrambled egg, wholegrain toast with avocado, small banana

Lunch:

Lamb meatballs with quinoa, roasted pumpkin, and steamed broccoli

Afternoon Snack:

Full-fat Greek yoghurt with nut butter and blueberries

Dinner:

Lentil and veggie soup with wholegrain toast soldiers

Milk feeds:

Morning and before bed only, if solids are well established



FINAL THOUGHTS

Sleep isn't just about routines, it's about the whole child. When we take a step back and look at the bigger picture, we often find gentle, sustainable answers in unexpected places.

Supporting your child's nutrition can:

- Improve sleep quality and consistency
- Reduce dependency on night feeding
- Regulate energy and emotions
- Lay the foundation for healthy growth and development

And remember, you're not expected to figure it all out alone. If you suspect nutrition may be part of your sleep puzzle, I'm here to help you investigate and gently guide your little one toward better rest.

A handwritten signature in a dark brown, cursive script that reads "Jess Hughes xx". The signature is fluid and personal, with a double "x" at the end.

Gentle & Holistic Sleep Consultant