THE RESILIENT KID PODCAST

Season 4 – Episode 15

Dr Jill McGarry – The Sleep Doctor

Ashley: Hello and welcome to the Resilient Kid podcast with me Ashley Costello and today I am joined by Dr. Jill McGarry. Now, are you struggling with sleep as a parent? Are your teens struggling with sleep or Even more, are your neurodivergent kids struggling with sleep? Well, you're in the right place today.

Good morning! Hello Jill, how are you?

Jill: Oh my gosh,

good morning. It's a Monday morning, so it's quite challenging for lots of people. I've just dropped my husband off at the train station at 7 o'clock, and that's not me, I'm an owl. So, and my alarm clocks are usually set, now I don't have kids till 8 o'clock. So, hopefully I'm going to be okay though, Ashley.

Ashley: Well, welcome, welcome. It is good It's funny, isn't it? Just, like, picking up on that, like, whether you're a night owl or an early bird, and I'm, like, I've, I was up at quarter to six, I'm definitely an early bird, I like to get lots of my stuff done before, kind of, the kids rise, and my working day starts, and you're, sounds like you're the opposite end.

Jill: Oh, yeah, completely. And it's really important, you know, we might as well just jump in, to know yourself. I often talk about the five pillars of sleep, and one of them is personalise. So, if you know what you are. It's even better because lots of people try and sink in with their partner and it's, it's not helpful.

And in fact, evolutionarily wise, we knew that we partnered up with somebody that's the opposite to us. We've done masses of research internationally and the majority of people partner up with somebody that's the opposite. But it made sense when we were cavemen and cavewomen. We needed longer to watch over the brood.

So one would do it while the other got some sleep and vice versa So

Ashley: That is so true, you know, so true. So my hubby is definitely a night owl and my goddaughter has just had a baby herself. And we was talking about how she goes to bed early and her partner stays up later to do like the last feed and stuff.

It's so important that we do recognize. What we are, I'm sure. So, so you said, Oh yes, absolutely. So you just, obviously we just said hello, you know, happy Monday. One of the things that I really liked about one of your Posts on LinkedIn was actually this Sunday night that kind of Sunday night dread that Sunday night Do you get proper sleep now when I was younger?

I used to work in a quite a famous bakery now and I was you know, when I was that kind of college and stuff and Every Friday night before I had to go in for my Saturday morning, I would dream of bread. Like constantly, I would dream of bread all the time. And then when I was an interpreter for deaf young adults, I used to dream in sign.

So, and that's kind of for me is the same You know, Sunday night feeling like my working week was Saturday. That was it. So you know, it's that Sunday night feeling, isn't it? So tell us a little bit about, and this is, you know, if you're a parent or an educator, please pin your ears back. Because this is fabulous tips from Jill.

So tell us, tell us a little bit about the Sunday night. Kind of routine.

Jill: I think it's that dread, isn't it? About, oh my gosh, what have I gotta remember? Will I be on full steam the minute I hit the office or the school? Or who's gonna be in school? Who have I gotta interact with that I don't normally do?

What lessons have I got? What things do I need in my bag? So it really fits nicely with what we were just saying before, that you know, if you know who you are and what kind of a sleeper you are, then that can be your first clue to what to do to help yourself with that Sunday night feeling. If you are an owl like me, you would prep like mad the night before.

If you are a lark like you, you might as well get up and do it then. But just knowing that, that makes a big difference. I mean, my two kids have got, they're old now, they're 28 and 18 But they've got fab memories of me prepping the night before. So it only took us 20 minutes to get out the door. And quite often we'd have to miss a

bus stop because we hadn't got there quick enough and catch the next one or the one after.

But all their mates were waving through the window. So it's not horrible memory, you know, being late and not being the first one to start the day isn't a terrible thing, but I think we do live in a very larkish world. So for those of us that are owls, it can feel quite like people think you're being lazy, but it's just, we have our energy at a completely different time.

So I on purpose, sometimes might send an email quite late at night just to get that other person to go, Oh Jill, you're a sleep expert. You shouldn't be sending emails now. I don't. Like, no, I'm living with me and my strengths and that's really important to be aware of that. But we all get that anxiety of pre doing something and just being aware of it and using it to your advantage can be helpful.

But if you are getting hugely worried, then and it happened every single, every single Sunday. Then perhaps there is a little bit of a workshop you can join that I'm running or some other pieces of material I've looked at or, or other information that's really useful because you don't have to struggle on a Sunday night.

But also remember it's just one night. So even if you struggle on a Sunday night, you've got the rest of the week. We were made as human beings to be really flexible, that we were meant to have one or two nights when I don't know, spiders, snakes, does that make sense Ashley

Ashley: Absolutely. And just on that note, kind of tell us a little bit about yourself, Jill, because obviously we know you're a doctor um, and you're known as the sleep better doctor, but tell us a little bit, how did you get into this?

Jill: Oh gosh. So I became a clinical psychologist when I was 27, I think it was.

So I took a bit of a gap I did my degree and then I went on and did the clinical psychology qualifications, and I specialised in learning disability and autism to begin with. I did that for 20 years, nearly. And during that time I got really good at teaching people and knowing how and helping people with sleep problems, because both people with learning disability and autism have huge sleep problems for very different reasons, need very different help.

But everybody was just offering the sleep hygiene advice out there. So I worked with the Manchester Sleep Service to make weekly adjustments to their clinic as well. And then I was wanting to do things differently. You know, you hit that age of 50, 55, and I was thinking, I'm going to retire from the NHS because it's exhausting, the hours you have to work and I know it's time to prioritise my health.

So I decided I want to run my own business and I thought, what am I good at? What's my, what's my unique thing that I could do? And it didn't take, it took me like two seconds to think, do you know what, it's going to be sleep. So I then worked at a perinatal team helping mums sleep because I knew that they had nursery nurses.

Helping the baby sleep, but nobody helping the mums. So I did a bit of work on the mother and baby unit to offer them some advice there. So I was just building up my skills in a wider area. And then I was asked to work at the Manchester Sleep Service. So I went full circle, I went back there again to help people that have got a thing called sleep apnea and trauma that they might need help with their sleep because of or narcolepsy.

So lots of the very specialist sleep problems. But in amongst all of that. I was a mum and I knew I loved my sleep, but I was going to have two kids that were not going to, well, I was hoping to have two kids, maybe even more and they weren't going to sleep well perhaps for a while. So I learned a lot about how to be good at helping kids to get off to sleep as well.

And then I had a heart condition, I had a car accident. And it caused, I can't even remember the name for it, but my heart would go into double speed and I, it couldn't do that for longer than four hours. And I began to realize rather than having the heart operation, that I had to have a combination of three things to set it off.

I had to be anxious or excited. So my adrenaline was flowing. Um, I had to have drank too much coffee and I had to have been sleep deprived. And if I had all those three, it would happen every single time. Didn't want to give up coffee, didn't want to give up being excited. So I got really good at my own sleep as well.

Ashley: Amazing. I mean, you know, to think that, you know, that that car accident has set that off and, and actually you've been able to manage that with your knowledge and, and, you know, your expertise that you've actually managed

that. Yeah. I can't imagine giving up coffee either. So like, absolutely well done. So tell us a little bit about, because obviously your, your children are older now.

So you've still got one in the teens, one in the twenties. Tell us a little bit, because we've had a lot of kids just doing the GCSEs, a lot of teens going through A levels or, you know, just. Kind of starting their university journey in September. Tell us a little bit about teens and sleep.

Jill: Well It's interesting, isn't it, that in the UK and in Europe, we have our kids going to school earlier than we even start work. Kids are now starting school at eight, half past eight. I mean, when I was at school, we started at nine and now earlier, but it has gone earlier. And again, that's us belonging to a larkish world, which isn't great for the teachers and never mind the pupils.

But we have an added problem in that teenager, their clocks do become more owlish in the teenage years. So in America and Australia, not all of America, California led the way, but several other countries, and they decided that because this is a natural thing, a natural phenomenon, or genes make us do it, and that they decided they'd have kids going into school later.

And what they did was they staggered it. So when you had hit secondary school, and the ones that are just starting secondary school would say start at nine o'clock, and then the next year will be 9. 15 and the next year 9. 30, so by the time you got to the end of school you were getting in at 10, 10. 30, which was perfect for getting enough sleep and having that staying up later at night and going into school later.

But what they all realised as well, it stopped a load of bullying. Because it was often the older kids picking on the younger kids, you know, trying to be bravado, you know, got the mates to try and prove stuff to, or just, it's a horrible time, isn't it? Lots of bullying happens, I'm not trying to excuse it, but it just means the environment was reducing.

The occasions that it could happen in. So teenagers definitely need to start the day later. So even if you do it at the weekend, it's great. And that's why I let my kids sleep in and we run after the bus. As well as the fact that me and one of my daughters is an owl. But the other thing to remember is they need more sleep.

They think that they're adults. And we often think of them, especially towards. The ages of 16, 15, 16, we think, you know, they're young adults, but actually they still

need a lot more sleep than the average adult person by two hours. So giving them that time, it's not great that they catch up at the weekend, but if that's all we can do because of what the school timings have done then we then it's better than nothing.

Even if you can just have one or two days during the week when they go to bed earlier would be helpful. But of course, gosh, when I even say go to bed earlier, teenagers definitely don't want to do that, do they? But then it made me think, oh my gosh, teenagers going to bed with their phones or their gaming kits.

So that's a whole extra conversation that we could get into as well.

Ashley: It's funny you should say that. So I often. I often have this conversation about if I had a school, you know, from my perspective from a psychotherapist and all the kids and teens that I see I always talk about the Differences that I would make to what the education system is.

And the first one is that absolutely they would not, but like you say, year seven would start earlier and as the, as it goes on and also, so the lunches are all staggered as well, because we know that breaks and lunches are a time. Like you say, where there's an. Opportunity for bullying, but actually people are just in a better mood if they've had more sleep.

You know, it's so, so important. So yeah. And it would help the teachers, wouldn't it? Oh, absolutely. You know, if they all went in at

Jill: different times, they could get some of the banking done. Some of the, an early doctor's appointment before they come in, you know, the. Flexibility is good for us all.

Ashley: Yeah, it is.

Absolutely. And I think you know, it's really unfair that we put this pressure on parents as well, you know, and as they're older, like my kids now are 14 and nearly 17, and actually I can go out early doors and they can go to school themselves because they're older, you know, so if it is that they, you know, didn't, you know start school till later, you know, they could wake up later and, and kind of ease themselves into the day instead of trying to get every last minute and then, you know, rush to school.

So yeah, absolutely. So we were scheduled to talk a few weeks ago and then, and you was invited to the autism show, which is amazing. And we were just chatting before we started recording and because that's, you know, obviously you've had a huge amount of experience in that area. Tell us a little bit about those.

'cause we have lots of parents, lots of teachers who are working with neurodivergent kids. Tell us a little bit about why sleep is so important and, and maybe some kind of tips that we can do, you know to help these particular children.

Jill: Gosh, yeah, so that's, that's a whole massive topic. And I think the first thing to say is to do that bit about why is sleep important that you asked.

There are several stages to sleep, but the two important ones is the deep sleep. And I love it being called deep sleep because sleep's a bit like Deep diving into the water. Michael Mosley that just recently died had a lovely idea that it was like a seal diving underneath the water. And the deep sleep is quite near the bed of the water.

And then you come up and you have REM sleep, which is your dreaming or what we think is the major part of emotional dreaming that happens quite near the surface. And then we dive down again and we do this kind of swim like a seal four or five times in the night. You know, for teenagers and for younger kids, we do it even more times.

And the deep sleep is really useful for our bodies to wash out all the toxins, for our muscles to repair themselves, for our neurotransmitters to get refreshed, for our gut to rebalance itself. So it's a really important part. And the first dive of the sea of that seal sleep is very long. So the deep sleep.

It's doing it for a long time and then the REM sleep is really tiny. But the second time you do it, it's slightly different because your body's done a lot of recovery already. The deep sleep gets shorter and the REM sleep gets longer. So you've got more time to work through things emotionally.

And again, it's just, our bodies are really clever.

We needed to do that again when we were cavemen and cavewomen because if we didn't recover physically first, then we wouldn't be alive the next day to fight off

the lions and tigers and snips, snakes and spiders. We'd have worked through it emotionally and not physically and therefore not have the strength to be able to do it the next day.

So just knowing that can be really useful. But knowing that. Dreaming is really close to the surface where you wake up means when people get frightened that they're remembering their dreams, knowing that actually it's your brain's way of working through whatever's happened during the day is really useful.

And knowing that That those things are happening on the other thing that's happening that that's important for teenagers to know is during that deep sleep we refresh our memory so during the day we collect lots of memories but during the night you have like a dustbin and you decide you filter through all your memories you choose which ones you want to put in the bin and which ones you want to put in longer term memory.

That's very simplification of it. But the more we can get that deep sleep when we're studying, the more capacity the next day we have to get new information in. And so that idea of cramming will only work if you're doing an exam the next day. But if you need to Constantly put new stuff into your memory, making sure you get good chunks of deep sleep is really important.

That's what's important about sleep. Sorry, Ashley, were you going to say something?

Ashley: No, no, no, go on, sorry.

Jill: But then the other thing is you said, what about for people with autism and neurodiversity? There is a whole raft of things that might be a problem, that people might need to work on, but the one that And I think the other thing that constantly comes to mind, and I constantly talked about at the Excel this weekend, and in Manchester a couple of weeks ago at the autism shows, and is the fact that people with autism have a problem with getting off to sleep and not staying asleep.

And when you go and see an ordinary Sleep specialist, they've not been trained in autism and don't ask those questions to really see the difference. And they see that getting off to sleep problem as an anxiety problem. But for many people with autism, it's not, it's a very organic problem, a functional problem.

NHS England know it is a physical problem, not a psychological one, to the extent that they now prescribe melatonin for all children with autism between the ages of 2 and 19. It used to be 5 and 16, but they've extended it, and there's quite a few of us in the world of autism trying to get back to be extended to be adults as well.

Because and autistic brain doesn't change at the age of 19. So, you know, the, the problem in them making that melatonin, well, we don't know what, what, what causes a problem in making the melatonin. We're not sure if it's the optic nerve, the pineal gland or the super charismatic nuclei or somewhere else within the brain.

Sleep is quite a new science, so I'm hoping we'll find out more and be able to, to offer even better ways of helping people get more melatonin into the brain and get off to sleep better, because it's the melatonin we need to get off to sleep. So we can take tablets for it, and that's why GPs have got nice guidance now it's called NG 128, that means that they can Go to the doctors and get it.

They don't even need to go to a paediatrician anymore or a sleep specialist to get the tablets. But you can also get it in daylight. So because I'm not neurodiverse and I can get off to sleep within 15 minutes, the average person with autism that has a sleep problem, that it's about sleep onset, getting off to sleep.

They can't get to sleep between two and four hours. It takes them to get off to sleep. And what we need to do is get more daylight into their eyes because the daylight getting into my eyes, I only need 15 minutes of morning, 20 minutes morning daylight, even on a rubbish day like today, like it's pretty cloudy out there and I'll be able to get off to sleep.

No problem. Whereas somebody with autism, it's very, very common that they struggle with doing that. And then we do a piece of work around. They don't want to take the tablets. That's fine. How long, how much extra daylight do they need? And everybody's different. Everybody needs different extra amount depending on them.

So some people it's two hours. One gentleman I'm working with at the moment, it's four hours and that's really hard to do. So he goes, he cycles to work now, cycles home and he uses a satellite to improve the amount. And it's amazing. It's like, it's like magic. Once you realize that this daylight. It is just such a great tablet, you know, for us to take naturally.

It makes a difference. So a solicitor I was working with in his 50s um, had had this problem, four hours of lack of sleep throughout his whole life, started taking the melatonin, started doing walks in the morning, using a satellite when there wasn't enough sunlight for him, or couldn't get up early in the morning.

And all of a sudden, he was getting to sleep within 15 minutes. He was like, Oh my God, Jill. It's like magic. It's like, I've got hours of my life back. And the same for a young gentleman at 17 that I'm working with now. He's like, I've got such energy because I'm not sluggish because I have got my sleep and I'm not worried about my sleep.

Because what often happens if you can't get off to sleep and you spend so much time getting off to sleep, you start not trusting your sleep and therefore you start getting insomnia. So, like I said, at the very beginning, there were five pillars of sleep. I've said about the personalize it. The other ones, trust.

And the other two Ps are protect it and prioritize it and the other one is value it. So that question you asked about what's important is why I try and explain to people, you know, sleep's not just you snooze, you lose your sleep when you're dead. You're just unconscious. It's so much more.

Ashley: I think it totally is so much more.

And we do, the thing is, when everything's going okay, we don't value it, do we? But it's when it goes wrong, when we can't sleep or when we're exhausted, we don't realize the benefits until things go wrong. And I think for me, you know, there is that, like you say, that consolidation of learning, particularly for the teens, you know there's, we know their brain does a lot of pruning, getting rid of the stuff that they don't, you know, they no longer need.

But one of the things that I think that as parents and educators, we don't kind of realize is that teens brains don't finish developing until well into the twenties. I think we think 18, that's it. They're done. Our job's done. It really isn't, is it? And, and I think actually the benefits of sleep is absolutely huge.

And I think the benefits of Getting outside, like, you know, we all know, we all know, of course we do. And we've talked a lot about, and since COVID is getting outside. But actually to think that that has a direct impact on your sleep is just

massive. You know, I've, I think when I think about in the day and the amount of clients I have and You know, going from here, there to everywhere.

How much of that is actually outside? You know, prioritizing how much is outside and getting some daylight in nature. That's amazing.

Jill: Do you know what? And some people think they're getting daylight because they've got but actually the windscreen stops the goodness of the light getting into your eyes to make the melatonin.

People say to me, oh, but I work from my study and my study's got a beautiful window and the sunlight's coming in. And I often use an app to show them the difference between. How much looks there is in their room compared to minutes stepping outside their door. Even just having your cup of coffee in the morning or your breakfast sitting on the doorstep if you don't have a garden, can be beneficial because it's better than being on the other side of the door.

But it's strange, isn't it? We just don't appreciate the freeness of it all.

Ashley: Yeah, we don't. And if you think about it, so, you know, I know a few of my clients from melatonin and it's absolutely been a game changer for them. But just generally for, you know, adults listening now, just, even if it's just a break.

If you're on a break from school, get outside just for five minutes. Take your brew outside and get that fresh air because we know it's not only going to impact your sleep, but it'll reset your nervous system. It sets you up better for, you know, your next lesson or for picking the kids up from school.

You know my kids both walk to school at the majority of the time. One of them is got probably a seven-minute walk. The other one's got a 25-minute walk. So occasionally we will give her a lift like that. But. You know, that's really important that they get that, you know but you've probably just heard my dog, my puppy Paddy.

If you're regular listening, you'll know we've got a new puppy called Paddy barking, but one of the things that we've kind of done is. One of the reasons why we wanted to get a dog for the family is so that we've got an excuse to go walking. We don't need an excuse. Don't, don't go out and get yourself a dog just to get outside.

But actually it kind of makes us go. And even first thing, my hubby will get up, he'll get his cup of tea and he'll go outside with the dog. Not on a walk, he just sits like you say Jill, sits at the front, throws the ball for the dog, but it's just that 10 minutes fresh air before he starts his working day.

And it just, it has made such a difference to his sleep and I hadn't, I hadn't clicked the two until you said it. So, yeah.

Jill: And you know, you said something then as well, Ashley, about it sets your clocks. I think you were talking about your nervous system, but the other problem for people with autism is their clocks is called their circadian rhythm is sort of sometimes out of line.

So there's a piece of work that needs to be done to try and get them more in line. For other people, they are very much in line with the daylight. So, you know, when it's really like early morning in the summer, they, they're up at four or five. So it's about helping them live within our very artificial world when actually it's not always beneficial, is it?

So some people as adults with autism actually choose professions or companies that can cope with their misalignment circadian wise and other jobs can't. So I sometimes do that work around helping them get back into sync with what would be the norm for everybody else. But yeah, you know, working day.

Yeah. But talking about dogs, I've got two dogs and my two teenagers, both girls, I think they really benefited from having dogs because with a dog,

they can cuddle a dog, get all the oxytocin they need without it affecting their need for autonomy, for independence. They're so strongly independent. Well, my two teenage girls were, that they wouldn't have wanted a cuddle from me. They would, but they would have definitely climbed in the dog bed.

Ashley: Absolutely. I, I'm a massive advocate for pets for kids and particularly kids who are neurodivergent as well, because again, for that, for those kinds of reasons that they don't necessarily want. And you know, there's sometimes my, my eldest one will sometimes say do you want a hug? That's like her indication that she needs a hug, but she didn't wanna ask it 'cause she's fiercely independent.

But she's the first one to pick one of the cats up. She's the first to cuddle the dog, you know? And yeah. And we know that it helps reset, so. Absolutely. Absolutely. Jill, is there anything else that any other. Kind of tip or anything that you're thinking that you want to finish on that maybe we haven't spoken about.

Now what I would say is please go and find Jill. Obviously under the show notes, we'll put all the links there. She's prolific on LinkedIn, so please go to LinkedIn. We'll have, we'll put all your links there, Jill. And so people can get in touch. They can follow you. They can ask you questions, you know, drop your email, things like that.

But is there anything that you think that we haven't covered that you think might be a good kind of finishing top tip for, for anyone listening to help with their sleep?

Jill: Yeah, if somebody is, has got autism, really think about the senses because when you're trying to sleep, your senses are really affected.

But if we're talking about generally like a top tip, it would be one of my favorite LinkedIn posts that I did around sleep hygiene because there's tons of complicated stuff out there about sleep hygiene, but I love making things simple. I think that was because I worked in the world of learning disabilities for so long and carers find it hard to remember complicated stuff.

So I would always say, if you've got. If you're wanting to work out how to get your sleep hygiene as good as possible, you just remember, need to remember four things. One is light, so make it as light as possible during the day, like we've been talking about, but also make it as dark as possible at night.

Heat, make your body nice and warm in the morning, which is another good reason to go for a walk because your body heats up and starts all your internal body clocks start to work so they know it's the morning. And the same at night, cool your body down, so that will be doing less activity. But having that bath, even though it will be a warm bath, when you step out of it, you'll have a cold rush of air, which is what we did when we were cavemen and women.

The sun would go down and we'd have a coldness that we'd need. So remember the temperature. Then the third one is routine. So if you're struggling with your sleep, always think about trying to make it as routine as possible. And the first thing to remember is not what time you go to bed to set, or what time you get up.

So if it's seven o'clock, it's eight o'clock, try and do it all the time, even at the weekend, if you have a sleep problem. If you don't, ignore most of my advice because the more you kind of think about it, the worse it gets. You just need to relax about it if need be. And then the fourth one is nutrition.

So, you know, thinking about when you have your coffee, thinking about as adults, and whether you're drinking alcohol. Thinking about making sure you've got prebiotic and probiotic food in your, your belly because your sleep and your gut work really, really closely together. So yeah, there's just four things to remember.

And sleep hygiene is just like dental hygiene and hand hygiene. That's why it's been called sleep hygiene and nothing else. Because if you've got a dental problem, you still keep doing the sleep hygiene, you still keep doing the dental hygiene stuff, you still brush your teeth, you still floss, same with hand hygiene, you don't stop washing your hands when you have a tummy bug.

But what happens with sleep is people have a sleep problem and then they start throwing out the sleep hygiene and trying other things. Keep it up, keep up the sleep hygiene, I suppose is my main big mantra.

Ashley: Excellent. I love that. And four very simple things that we can do. So absolutely brilliant. Dr. Jill McGarry, thank you very much for joining us on the Resilient Kid podcast.

As I say, look at the show notes, look at the reels, we will put Dr. Jill's details underneath and yeah, please, please listen to her advice. We all need a little bit of extra sleep and good quality sleep as well. Thank you, Jill. Oh, pleasure. Thank you very much for inviting me. You're welcome.