

Sleep for children with Autism

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Introduction

Many children and young people have sleep issues. But for those with autism, sleeping well might be particularly difficult. In this issue we offer advice and guidance, for parents and carers, on how their children and young people can get a better nights sleep.

Why is sleep important?

Difficulties around bedtime and not getting enough sleep can result in children and young people being sleepy in the daytime, struggling to pay attention or presenting with behavioural problems like aggression or hyperactivity. Those who get a good night's sleep are generally happier, alert and able to pay more attention during the daytime and importantly it also means that their parent or carer gets valuable rest too.

How much sleep do children need?

How much sleep a child or young person needs will vary, we all have our own beliefs about how much sleep is necessary. Generally it is thought that by the age of one most children are able to sleep through the night.

When does sleep become a problem?

Sleep becomes a problem if it affects the young person or their parents or carers' quality of life.

Sleep difficulties are reportedly experienced by as many as 80% of children and young people with autism and as a result most parents will also struggle with their own sleep.

Types of sleep difficulties...

There are different types of sleep difficulties and it is helpful to think about what the problem is for the child or young person. Sleep difficulties may relate to the following:

- Falling asleep
- Staying asleep and waking during the night
- Unusual or challenging behaviours at night time
- Sleepiness during the day

Reasons for sleep difficulties...

The reasons for sleep difficulties may be hard to identify but the following include some commonly shared theories:

Diagnosed conditions - especially those that may feature hyperactivity or require medications which affect sleep.

Day time activity - children who sleep during the day, don't get enough day-time activity or get too much exercise in the lead up to bedtime.

Environment - too many distractions, bright lights, too much noise, or an overly warm temperature.

Top Tips:

- Be consistent! Follow the same bed time routine
- Keep the environment simple and relaxing
- Find a way to reward good behaviour in the moment when it happens
- Try to avoid your child napping in the day
- Try to avoid night time drinks and snacks
- Don't be put off if things initially get worse, change can take time!

Food and drink – Caffeinated drinks such as tea, coffee or fizzy drinks may disturb sleep. Some children with autism also have gastrointestinal problems so they may experience discomfort during or after eating, which might also disturb their sleep.

High anxiety and arousal – Many children with autism experience anxiety and this may make relaxing for bedtime difficult.

Lack of routine – Children rely on reassuring routines to help them settle to sleep.

Melatonin levels – Melatonin is a hormone produced in the body which normally helps regulate sleep-wake cycles. It is thought that melatonin levels may be irregular in children and young people with autism where they may produce melatonin but not enough or not at the right times of day. Melatonin can also be affected by substances like caffeine.

Physical illness – Illness or discomfort including reflux, toothache or eczema can make settling for bedtime difficult.

Sensory issues – Children and young people with autism are often hypersensitive to sensory experiences e.g. sound, touch, smell, taste or vision. This can be both distracting and distressing and make the process of falling asleep very difficult. For example the feel of a blanket, bright lights or the sound of people nearby could be distressing.

Social cues – Children and young people with autism may not pick up on the social cues that lead up to bedtime which means they don't understand what needs to happen so they need help to know why and when they need to sleep.

Transition – Children and young people with autism may struggle with transitions between activities and bedtime and therefore need plenty of reassurance around bedtime and sleeping.

What helps?

Sometimes ... it helps to just give it time. Most children will experience brief periods of poor sleep after being ill, during holidays or during periods of particular stress. With time, a normal sleep pattern may soon be established.

Behavioural interventions should be considered for children and young people with autism who experience sleep disturbances. A number of ideas are explored here...

Use a sleep diary – try a sleep diary to record sleep and wakefulness over a 2 week period, use this to try and spot any obvious problems or patterns. If any new routines are started a sleep diary will also help you to see if what you're doing is working.

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Have a sleep routine – A bedtime routine should be no more than thirty minutes, and be consistent so that the child or young person can easily predict what is going to happen. The routine can include things that relax such as a story or music. It is important to avoid any stimulating activities before bedtime like watching TV, computer games or play. It may be helpful to have an identifiable 'end point' that the child or young person can become familiar with that marks bedtime e.g. a familiar phrase like 'Sleep time (name)'. If the child or young person then struggles to go to sleep, this phrase can be repeated.

Visual routines – Children and young people with autism respond well to structure and routines particularly visually. Consider creating a visual routine so that the child or young person is aware that it is bedtime. The internet has a number of free resources for sleep routine charts so you can use pictures or even ask the child or young person to draw each of their bedtime tasks.

Limited communication after routines – Limit your interaction after the sleep routine. Any interaction when the child gets up or cries could be seen as an expected response, a hard habit to break! Keep your interaction simple and do not engage with them too much e.g. don't talk, play or make too much eye contact, guide them back to bed, briefly soothe and then leave them to sleep again.

Sleeping alone – It is important that children and young people learn to sleep on their own. Parents and carers can consider using a graded approach where they will gradually

build on their distance away from the child or young person. For example moving from lying on the bed to sitting on the bed, and then perhaps to standing in the doorway and then standing outside of the room.

Autism-related sleep disturbance is common and treatable.

Using rewards – If a child is rewarded, a behaviour is more likely to happen again, so it may be helpful to set some good behaviour goals for bedtime. Think about making goals simple at first e.g. putting on pyjamas when asked. For most children verbal praise or affection is enough but others may prefer a visual token, perhaps a sticker on a sleeping chart. Make sure that the child or young person knows what to do to get a reward and is rewarded as soon as possible for good behaviour. Rewards can be reduced and removed once a successful bedtime routine is established.

Sleeping in bed – It is important that children and young people are encouraged to go to bed when they are drowsy and before they go to sleep. It is important to avoid bad habits gained from falling asleep elsewhere. Anything different in a young person's surroundings from when they sleep to when they wake can be unsettling.

Avoid naps – Naps are good for preschool children but they could be interfering with sleep, try to reduce or avoid these during the day.

Exercise – Having some exercise during the day, especially outdoor activities, can make it easier for children and young people to fall asleep and children who exercise tend to have deeper sleep. However, try to avoid exercise too close to bedtime as it could make sleep more difficult.

Control food and drink – Avoid caffeine and snacks in the lead up to bedtime. Caffeine is found not only in coffee, but also in tea, chocolate and some fizzy drinks. Some children and young people with autism experience gastrointestinal problems so try to avoid eating too late at night as they may experience some discomfort that keeps them awake.

Relaxation – Children and young people with autism may feel anxious around bedtime and often are unable to express their need to unwind. Activities that involve relaxation may be helpful, some ideas include:

- A warm bath
- A gentle foot, hand or scalp massage
- A routine soothing activity
- Music

Environment

Children and young people with autism often have sensory issues and are sensitive to noise, light or touch. It may be helpful to change the environment. Examples include:

- Reduce distractions e.g. toys, electronics, pictures
- Reduce noise
- Use gentle lighting and darkness for sleep
- Consider the feel of bedding or clothing, for example does the child prefer a heavier blanket or do they dislike the feel of a label in clothing
- Consider if any smells may be unsettling or relaxing.

Medication

There are medications that are used with children and young people with autism to help them to sleep. Medication may be considered when other behavioural interventions have not been successful and if the negative impact on the child or young person and their parents or carers is problematic.

If medication is considered then it is only provided via consultation with a Specialist Paediatrician or Psychiatrist with expertise in the management of sleep or autism.

Don't forget to look after yourself!

If you are going to help a child improve their sleep, think about the support you may need and how to get the timing right to ensure you are able to use a calm, consistent approach.

Spread the word...

If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our clinical team. If you would like us to cover any particular subjects around autism in future editions then please let us know by emailing info@optionsautism.co.uk

The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources

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