

Many children with autism have difficulty falling or staying asleep. This information sheet explains some of the reasons children may have difficulties with sleep, and gives some tips on how to improve sleep.

Studies have shown that significant sleep problems occur in 40-80% of children with autism. Sleep monitoring studies have shown that children with autism take longer to fall asleep, are awake for longer in the middle of the night, and sleep for shorter periods than typically developing children. Sleep problems tend to persist through adolescence in people with autism. For children with autism, insufficient sleep may affect daytime behaviours, and lead to more hyperactivity and repetitive behaviours.

Causes of sleep difficulties in children with autism

The causes of sleep difficulties are likely to be different for every person. The most common reasons for sleep difficulties in all children are environmental influences or inadvertent behavioural shaping. For example, a parent may rock or hold their child until they fall asleep. However, when the child wakes in the night, they do not have access to things in their environment that they associate with sleep, so they are unable to get back to sleep by themselves. On the other hand, if a child sleeps in a room that is also used for stimulating play activities during the day, this can also affect sleep. Some children with autism may also have problems with natural sleep/wake cycles which may affect their sleep.

Common issues with sleep

1. Settling and waking problems

For some children with autism, fear of the unknown may prevent them from falling asleep. However, settling problems are usually associated with other common issues seen in sleep.

In older children, waking problems may indicate that they have not yet developed mature sleeping patterns. As babies they woke up to feed every couple of hours and this pattern has persisted. This may also be an indication that they are suffering from anxiety that is preventing them from falling into a deep sleep. They may also be suffering from acute nightmares that are waking them up.

2. Social cueing problems

Social cueing is learning why and in what order things should happen. Children with autism may not make the connection between their family going to bed and their own need to sleep. Some children may also find the transition from sleeping in their parent's bedroom to sleeping in their own bedroom difficult due to anxieties associated with change.

3. Sensory issues

There are many sensory issues associated with sleep. Sensitivity to sound, touch, and visual stimuli can be distracting and distressing and can affect the process of falling asleep. Light flooding into the room or noises caused by doors or beds may create sensory issues for children with autism.

4. Food and Drink

Having caffeinated drinks like tea, coffee, or coke close to bedtime might disturb sleep. Gastrointestinal problems may also cause discomfort during sleep.

5. Hypersomnia

If somebody is sleeping for longer than expected, they may have hypersomnia. Some children with autism may want to spend longer in their beds or bedroom because it is a place where they feel relaxed or comfortable.

Older children and teenagers may be experiencing more serious difficulties motivating themselves. They may have fears about the day ahead, or may be experiencing depression. Excessive sleep in teenagers could indicate psychological problems, so it may be worth talking to your GP.

Hints and tips to handle sleeping difficulties

1. Explain sleep

Some children have difficulty understanding what sleep is and why they need to sleep. You can explain to your child that they need sleep to rest their bodies and to help them grow. You may need to use visual guides or social stories to explain more about sleep. It is important that they know that everybody needs sleep every day, and that there are certain times when we all go to sleep.

2. Keep a sleep diary

A sleep diary is an excellent way of tracking the length and quality of sleep. It is also a useful way of seeing if any routines, behavioural modifications, or dietary changes that you are trying are working. A sleep diary should include as much accurate detail as possible about a night's sleep. Useful information to put in a sleep diary includes:

- What time your child went to bed and what time they got up
- The total number of hours that they were asleep
- How easily your child fell asleep
- How many times, and for how long, they woke up during the night
- How they felt when they woke up and how they felt during the day (for example, if they felt sleepy in the afternoon)
- Their bedtime routine
- Their diet and exercise for the day.

Sleep diaries can help professionals involved in your child's life, like teachers, GPs, and social workers. Make sure that you keep the diary for at least two weeks so you can see any patterns.

For more able children, sleep diaries can also be used as a visual reminder of their sleeping patterns. They can be used to offer incentives, such as a treat for not getting out of bed for three nights in a row.

3. Establish a routine

Routines can be extremely helpful for children with autism. They allow the child to feel safe and in control, and they can help to remove any anxieties about change or surprise. A good bedtime routine should include calming and relaxing activities, as well as important everyday activities such as washing, going to the toilet, and brushing your teeth. It can also include activities specifically related to your child, like reading a favourite story or listening to calming music.

It might be useful to present the routine visually with different pictures of each activity. You can include as much detail as you think is necessary (going up the stairs, closing the curtains, turning off the light, climbing into bed). For some children it may also be useful to build in some time to prepare for the next day, like getting their school uniform ready and packing a school bag.

It is important to remember that a routine needs to be consistent and followed every day. Set realistic and specific bedtime and waking up times and stick to them. Try to follow the routine during the weekend and holidays as well. Create a routine that can easily be followed anywhere; activities such as playing in a particular room are not easy to do when you are away from home.

4. Relaxation

Some children with autism may start to feel anxious as bedtime approaches, and they may not be able to communicate how they are feeling. This is where relaxation techniques can be helpful. Not all of them will suit each child, so you may have to try a few before finding one that works. Some examples include:

- A gentle foot, hand, or scalp massage
- Quiet time before bed
- Listening to calm, soothing music
- Gentle lighting in the bedroom
- Setting some time aside for your child to talk about their day and to write down any worries that they might have

Relaxation before bedtime also includes removing any stimulating or energetic activities from a child's routine. Lively exercise shortly before bedtime is likely to make a child more alert and will not help to relax them. Similarly, stimulating activities such as watching television, listening to loud music, or playing video games are also not good for creating a calm and relaxed mood before bedtime. It is important that a child associates their bed with sleep, so make sure that they do not use their bed for these activities.

5. Make sleep more comfortable

The sensory problems associated with autism mean that some children may find their bed or their bedroom an uncomfortable place to be. This might make it much harder for a child to fall asleep. There are a number of things that you can do to help limit any sensory issues associated with sleep:

- Use dark curtains or black-out blinds to block out any light.
- Use a thick carpet to reduce noise and make sure that doors are firmly shut. Try to make sure that a child's bedroom is in a quiet area of the house, and consider moving their bed away from a wall if there are any noises coming through the wall.
- You could consider using ear-plugs if noise continues to be a problem.
- Remove any distractions such as toys or pictures on the wall (unless your child finds these relaxing).
- Remove any labels from pyjamas and bedding. Some children may also have problems with elastic in clothes. Make sure that they are wearing pyjamas that they find comfortable.
- Consider using a weighted blanket. These are made from a thick material with bean-filled pockets. They can help children to feel their movements better without being too restrictive.

6. Diet

Avoid letting your child drink caffeinated or sugary drinks like tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks, or any drinks that contain a lot of sugar in the hours before they go to bed. It is also a good idea to try and avoid any foods that may be causing wind or constipation, as the discomfort caused by this may be an important factor in disturbed sleep.

If eating and drinking is part of your child's bedtime routine, it may be quite stressful to suddenly change this. It may be more practical to slowly phase out certain foods or drinks, or to replace them with alternatives like decaffeinated tea or coffee.

Medication

Behavioural interventions and practical solutions to sensory problems are the best way to address any difficulties that your child has with sleeping. However, in some cases these may not work and the next step may be to try medication. Treating sleeping problems in children using medication is seen as a last resort as it may become habit-forming and it rarely tackles the root cause of the problem.

Some studies have linked the hormone melatonin with sleeping patterns. Melatonin supplements are available on prescription in the UK. You should consult your GP for more information on melatonin. There are also some foods that are rich in melatonin, such as oats, rice, sweetcorn, tomatoes, plums, and brazil nuts. However, there is no research that clearly links a melatonin-rich diet with improved sleep in children.

If you feel that your child's health is becoming adversely affected by poor sleep, a GP may be prepared to prescribe medication. You should always consult your GP before giving your child any supplement or medication, as they will be able to address your case on a one-to-one basis and decide on the best course of action.

Some health food stores also offer 'natural' remedies that claim to be able to treat insomnia and other sleeping difficulties. It is important to consider the impact that these treatments may have on any medication that your child is currently taking. Always consult your GP before giving your child a 'natural' or 'alternative' remedy.

If you do use medication to help treat sleeping difficulties, it is important to maintain any behavioural approaches that you are using. This will help your child to maintain a healthy sleeping pattern when they stop using the medication.

Top 10 sleep tips

1. Block out any light from streetlights or passing cars using thick, dark curtains or blinds.
2. Record sleep patterns and information in a sleep diary.
3. Have a set bedtime and waking up routine and stick to it every day.
4. Make sure your child's pyjamas and bedding are comfortable by removing labels.
5. Have a 'quiet hour' before bedtime when your child can unwind and do a relaxed activity that they enjoy.
6. Avoid stimulating activities like television and video games in the hours before bedtime.
7. Remove any distractions such as toys and games from the bedroom.
8. Make sure your child is sleepy at bedtime by avoiding naps and making sure they exercise during the day.
9. Try to make sure that the bed and bedroom are associated with sleep. Avoid letting your child watch TV or play video games in bed.
10. Spend some time each evening talking to your child about their day. This way they can ask any questions or voice any concerns they have before they go to bed.