

Getting a Good Night's Sleep

Introduction

This is an overview of common sleep issues in children with autism, and tips on how you can help your child get a good night's sleep. Sleep disturbances are very common in children with autism. Research suggests that up to 80% of children with autism have difficulties with sleep. These issues can range from not being able to fall asleep, to not staying asleep through the night, to having disturbed sleep, and to waking up very early. Some children also have prolonged periods for which they are awake, and then prolonged periods for which they sleep. Sleep disturbances affect not only the child, but also the caregivers who lose sleep together with their child. Ideally, children should be getting a minimum of 8 or more hours of sleep, and a lack of sleep affects a child's behavior and overall wellbeing.

Possible Causes for Disturbed Sleep

There is ongoing research on why so many children with autism have sleep difficulties. Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, which means that it affects the brain. Since the brain controls sleep, there is a strong relationship between having a neurodevelopment disorder and having sleep disturbances. Some of the reasons why children with autism may have sleep issues include:

- 1) **Medical Issues** – Sleep disorders that affect children include obstructive sleep apnea, seizure disorder, parasomnia, restless leg syndrome and more. The only way to identify a sleep disorder is to see a qualified medical practitioner who can assess your child's sleep patterns. Low levels of melatonin, which is a sleep-inducing hormone produced by the body, can also cause sleep disturbances. Acid reflux or other gastrointestinal problems are also another common cause for sleep disturbances, as they can cause discomfort when a child lies down to sleep.
- 2) **Anxiety and hyperactivity** – Anxiety is a relatively common cause of sleep disorders, and many children with autism have anxiety. A child's therapist or psychologist may be able to identify the root cause of your child's anxiety. Brain hyperactivity is also another known cause for sleep disturbances. This type of hyperactivity is common in children with autism, and may prevent them from feeling sleepy and relaxed at bedtime.

Tips for a Better Night's Sleep

Now that we have reviewed some of the possible causes for sleep issues, let's look at some tips for a

better night's sleep. The ideas we share here are general tips on how to help your child sleep better. Before you intervene, it is important to get a medical opinion from your child's doctor. They may want to conduct a sleep study, which can pinpoint underlying causes for sleep disturbances, such as sleep apnea, which will need to be addressed by a medical professional.

- 1) **Relaxing night time routine** – Having a fixed, relaxing night time routine can get your child to sleep better. You can try giving your child a warm bath in the evening. You can also give your child a gentle massage if they will tolerate it. Reading in bed is also a nice way to unwind. Some families find that a warm cup of herbal tea, such as chamomile tea helps their child fall asleep. The key is consistency, and sticking to a predictable routine that works for you and your child.
- 2) **A visual schedule** – Creating a visual schedule which includes all the steps your child will go through at bedtime can be helpful. You could include pictures of teeth brushing, pajamas, storybooks and getting into bed. This is a good way to let your child know what to expect next.
- 3) **Supplements** – Some physicians suggest melatonin to help children fall asleep. Research suggests that small doses of melatonin can help children with autism fall and stay asleep at night. Melatonin is a hormone, and should only be given to a child if it is recommended by a physician. Your child's physician will need to determine the correct dosage, if this is something that they recommend for your child. You can also ask about vitamin supplements that may help them with sleep.
- 4) **Avoid over-stimulation** – Television and tablets have been shown to have an adverse effect on sleep. Children should avoid watching television or using a computer or tablet up to two hours before bedtime. Getting adequate exercise has shown to play a positive role in getting children to fall asleep, however, a child should not engage in vigorous exercise up to four hours before bedtime. Sugar, chocolate and other stimulants should also be avoided a few hours before bedtime.
- 5) **Keep a sleep diary** – A sleep diary is a record of your child's sleep patterns, and can be very useful if you want to understand their sleep patterns. A sleep diary can include when and where a child

falls asleep, how long it takes them to fall asleep and how long they stay asleep. You can also note what they did or ate before bedtime, and what medications they are on, to see if diet or medications are affecting their sleep patterns. If you are working with a doctor or therapist, having a sleep diary can substantiate your concerns and highlight things that might be affecting your child's sleep.

- 6) **A comfortable sleep environment** – Making subtle changes in your child's sleep environment may help them sleep better at night. Use black-out curtains when possible to ensure that your child's room is dark. Comfortable bedding, a weighted blanket and soft non-synthetic pajamas may also help. Determine if your child prefers a cooler or slightly warmer room temperature. You may also want to turn off appliances such as a noisy dishwasher, to help your child fall asleep and avoid any type of sensory overload. Though the white noise or appliances might be desired by your child.
- 7) **Music and Sound** – If your child likes music, you can play soothing instrumental music while they get ready for bed. Some children may also find white noise relaxing. You can get white noise CDs, apps on a tablet, or even white noise machines that you can use during bedtime. There are also certain types of music that you can play during sleep that are relaxing for the brain.
- 8) **Create a safe environment** – To ensure that you are getting enough sleep, you can think about using child-proofing tools to avoid accidents from happening if your child wakes up at night and you are asleep. Use a baby-monitor to know when your child is awake during the night. A security alarm, and a GPS tracker may also be used to avoid situations where a child could accidentally wander off at night.
- 9) **Sleep medication** – A physician may prescribe sleep medication for a child who is unable to sleep, though it should only be used as a last resort. There is limited evidence to suggest that sleep medication works for children with autism, and some research even suggests that it does not work well in the long run.

Conclusion

There are many different causes for sleep disorders in children with autism. The first step to getting better sleep is a thorough medical assessment from your child's physician. We hope you will also try some of the tips we have discussed here with your child. Your child's therapist may be able to suggest behavioral interventions for a child who is aggressive or unmanageable during the nighttime routine, so do talk to them if this is an issue for you.

You can find many other learning modules on the Porchlight website, www.porchlighteducation.org.