

Sleep **strategies**

**for Autistic children
with sleep problems**





Sleep strategies

Many Autistic children struggle to get a good night's sleep. This is often due to problems with falling asleep, staying asleep and/or waking up early. Good sleep is important for all children as it supports growth, development, and learning.

Poor sleep can not only affect development, but for Autistic children, it can also lead to:

- Increased anxiety
- Increased sensory sensitivities
- Trouble paying attention
- Hyperactivity
- More meltdowns
- Aggression and anger
- Increased communication difficulties

Having an Autistic child with sleep problems can be stressful for the whole family. This booklet outlines some strategies you can try, to help your child get a good night's sleep.

When trying any of these strategies, keep the following in mind:

- It might take a few weeks of consistent effort to achieve positive change in your child's sleep.
- Things might temporarily get worse as your child adjusts to the change but will likely improve as they settle into their new routine.
- Pick a suitable time to try a new strategy. Only start changing their bedtime routine when you have the time and energy needed to commit to it.
- Make gradual changes and only put in place one change at a time.
- Remember to provide your child with a lot of encouragement and praise when getting them to change their routine.

Sleep diary

A sleep diary involves tracking your child's sleep patterns.

You can collect information about:

- What time they go to bed
- How long it takes them to fall asleep and whether they fell asleep easily or with difficulty
- How many times they wake up or get out of bed during the night
- What time they wake up and if they wake up refreshed
- Eating and physical activity during the day.

A sleep diary is a great place to start because it can help you identify what issues your child is having with sleep. This can help guide you towards the right sleep strategy for your child. You can also use it to track changes as you try different sleep strategies to see if they are working. Also, if you need to seek professional help for your child's sleep, you can show the sleep diary to your GP or allied health professional to help explain the problem.

Example of a sleep diary

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Activity before bed							
Time went to bed							
Time to fall asleep							
Number of night awakenings							
Morning wake-up time							
Total amount of sleep							
Quality of sleep (poor, fair, good)							
Drowsiness the next day? (y/n)							
Time(s) of drowsiness							
Factors that could have prevented sleep (noise, excitement etc.)							
Factors that helped sleep							
Nap length							
Comments							

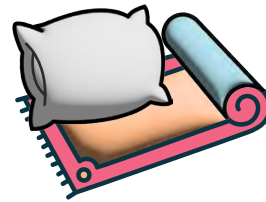
Creating a sensory friendly bedroom



Use warm toned lights and avoid bright white light.



Try playing soft music or white noise.



Place soft furnishings, like rugs and cushions, in the room to absorb sound.



Install heavy curtains and/or a bed canopy to block out light.



Try a weighted blanket. Make sure it is the right weight for your child's size.



Avoid lots of toys in the bed. Create an alternative special place (e.g. shelf or chair) for their beloved toys and keep one special toy in the bed.

Your child's sleeping challenges may be related to or exacerbated by an uncomfortable or stimulating sensory environment. Looking at the design and contents of your child's bedroom may provide insight into why they have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep. Below are some ideas you can try to create a sensory friendly bedroom that helps your child relax.



Make sure their pyjamas and bedding are a soft material that doesn't irritate them. Cut the tags off their pyjamas.



It can be hard to sleep if the room is too hot or too cold. Keep their room a comfortable temperature, around 18–19°C.



The bed should only be used for sleep. Set up a separate spot with a comfortable chair or beanbag for relaxing in during the day.



Minimise noise from other rooms as much as possible. If your child is sensitive to sound, try sound proofing their room (e.g. install solid doors).



A tidy room is more relaxing than a cluttered one. Encourage your child to pack everything away before getting ready for bed. Paint their room a soft calming colour and avoid bright colours to aid relaxation.



Keep electronics out of the bedroom.

Teaching the importance of sleep



Below is a story you can read with your child to help them understand the importance of sleep. It is a good idea to read this to them before you start making changes to their bedtime routine so that they understand why those changes are occurring. You can read this story with them as many times as you would like.

A bedtime story

It is nighttime. Ben and Amy are getting ready for bed.

Ben ran around the house playing with his dog until bedtime. He quickly went to the toilet and brushed his teeth. He got in bed and turned off the lights, but he could not fall asleep.

Amy stopped playing games on her tablet 30 minutes before bed. She got ready for bed and read a book with her mum. When it was time to turn off the lights, Amy fell asleep quickly.

The next day, Ben felt tired and grumpy. He had trouble focusing at school.

Amy felt energetic and happy. She learned lots in school and had lots of energy to play.

Can you spot the difference between what Amy and Ben did before going to bed? Who had a bad bedtime routine and who had a good bedtime routine?



Teaching the importance of sleep (cont.)

Bedtime routines are important for a good night's sleep. A bedtime routine helps you wind down from the day.

Ben has a bad bedtime routine. He did not relax before getting ready for bed. This meant Ben did not feel sleepy when he went to bed, which made it very hard to fall asleep. Ben did not get enough sleep, so he felt tired the next day.



Amy has a good bedtime routine. She did relaxing things before going to bed. This meant she felt relaxed and sleepy when she went to bed. This helped her fall asleep quickly and get a good night's sleep. Amy got enough sleep, so she felt happy and energetic the next day.



Getting enough sleep is important for your health and learning. Sleep helps you:

- build energy for the next day
- grow big and strong
- sort and store information from the day
- cope with big feelings.

I will be like Amy and do relaxing things before I go to bed. This will help me get the amount of sleep I need. When I get enough sleep, I will have energy to learn and play.



You can follow the story by explaining the change you are going to make to your child's bedtime routine. Explain that this change will help them get enough sleep and feel energised the next day.

Setting the right bedtime



Depending on your child's age, they will need a certain amount of sleep within a day. If your child needs to wake up at a certain time (e.g. for school), work backwards from that time to find their ideal bedtime.

Children under the age of 5 can have naps, but children aged 6 and over should be getting all their sleep at night.

If your child is currently not getting tired until after their ideal bedtime, you can start the process of bringing their bedtime forward.

- 1 Start your child's bedtime routine when they are tired. This might mean they are up later than their ideal bedtime at the start of this process.
- 2 Once your child is getting to sleep quickly (see other strategies in this booklet to help with this), start moving their bedtime earlier by about 15 minutes every few days. Keep doing this until you reach their ideal bedtime.

- 3 This should result in your child getting sleepy earlier and being ready to sleep at their ideal bedtime.
- 4 With naps, as your toddler gets older, aim to have naps earlier in the day so they are not too close to bedtime.

Creating a consistent bedtime routine for your child is one of the best things you can do to help them get to sleep.

Autistic children often prefer routine as it can help reduce feelings of anxiety. Having the same predictable activities before bed will create an association between those activities and relaxation, making it easier for them to fall asleep.

- A bedtime routine should be about 15 to 30 minutes long. A sleep clock is a great way to start their bedtime routine. You can use it to set a gentle alarm that prompts the start of their routine.
- Gradually decrease stimulation throughout the routine. For example, if your child finds a bath stimulating, put that early in the schedule then move to more relaxing activities.
- Be as consistent as possible. This also includes their wake-up time, which should stay the same every day of the week, including weekends.

Creating a relaxing and consistent bedtime routine with a visual schedule

A great tool to help you stick to a consistent routine is a visual schedule. A visual schedule provides information through pictures about planned events. It provides easy-to-understand information about the steps in an activity.

A visual schedule can help reduce confusion about what to do and increase independence.

It is a great idea to involve your child in the creation of their visual schedule so they can understand its purpose and how to use it.

Following are some example images you can use to build your child's visual schedule. You can use cartoon images like in the examples shown, or you can use real images of your child and their room/bed. Put the visual schedule in their bedroom so that they can refer to it as they go about their bedtime routine.

Go to the toilet



Brush your teeth



Take a bath or shower



Listen to music



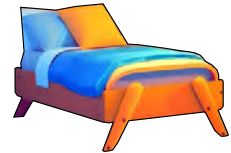
Read a story



Put on pyjamas



Get into bed



Turn off devices



Take medicine



Turn off the lights



Have a cuddle



Say goodnight



Go to sleep



Have a drink



Helping your child sleep alone

A good bedtime routine will teach your child how to get ready for bed and fall asleep independently.

But this can be tricky if your child is used to falling asleep while you are present. If you have built yourself too heavily into their bedtime routine, they will become reliant on you to relax and struggle to fall asleep without you.

You can gradually remove yourself from their sleep routine. It is important to have patience and not to do this too quickly so that your child does not become anxious.

- Talk to your child during the day about how they are getting older and how big kids sleep on their own. Reassure them that they are safe and that you will still be nearby.

- Gradually move yourself further away from them/their bed, increasing your distance every few nights.
 - If you are lying in the bed with them, change to sitting on the bed with them for a few nights.
 - From sitting on the bed, move to a chair next to their bed.
 - Increase the distance of the chair from the bed every few nights.
 - Eventually, be on the chair outside their door.
- As you increase your distance, reduce amount of attention you give your child as they try to settle. This reinforces idea that the bed is just for them and that they do not need you to fall asleep.
- If they become upset in bed, wait a few minutes to see if they self-settle. If they don't, make a brief visit with limited physical and verbal contact (e.g. a brief hug). Provide them with reassuring but brief words (e.g. 'It's time for bed, you are OK, good night'), then return to where you were.
- If you need to go back again, wait longer each time before you go to them and use the same technique.



Managing night awakenings with a bedtime pass

Some children have trouble staying in bed through the night. One effective tool to help children stay in bed is a bedtime pass.

A bedtime pass is a card you can give to your child at bedtime, which they can present to you in exchange for one free trip out of bed. They can use it in exchange for whatever they would like, such as a drink or a cuddle. Here is how you can implement a bedtime pass:

- 1 Show your child how the bedtime pass works. You can do this with a story that explains how it works and how it will help them sleep better.
- 2 Involve your child in choosing the rewards they get for not using the pass and staying in bed all night.
- 3 At bedtime, give your child the pass. It is a good idea to remind them how the pass works.
- 4 If they get out of bed and present you with the pass, calmly take the pass and respond to their needs before putting them back to bed.

- 5 If your child gets out of bed again after using the pass, calmly take them back to bed and give them as little attention as possible.
- 6 If your child keeps the pass all night, provide them with a reward in the morning. Give them a lot of praise. The rewards you give can increase for consecutive nights of staying in bed. As they get better at staying in bed, you can start to space out or lessen the rewards so that they become less reliant on them as a motivation for staying in bed.



Notes

A series of 15 horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.

Notes



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