

Autism and Sleep

Developing a health sleep routine for your child with autism can support both the child and the whole family to get more sleep, which can have wide ranging positive outcomes. Given autism is unique to each child, so too will be the family's individual circumstances and experiences of sleep differences. If your child is experiencing sleep difficulties, always consult your Health Visitor or G.P for additional supports that they can provide advice on.

There are some key strategies to explore when working to improve a child's sleep routine:

Review daily routine

Make sure daytime activities promote night-time sleeping. Regular exercise and activities can help your child sleep better during the night. Have your child wake up at the same time each morning and, if old enough, eliminate daytime naps. Pay attention to those things that tend to arouse your child, such as video games, loud movies, television shows or certain stimulating activities. End these activities before dinner to allow your child to have several hours of calming activities before bedtime. Use relaxation methods such as quiet time, having a bath, massage or time to unwind before bedtime. Schedule bed-time for a regular time every night to promote consistency.

Create a bedtime schedule/routine

Establish a basic ordered routine which you can implement with visual timetables (words, symbols or photos) to make the process of bedtime easier. Bedtime routines can include bathing, getting dressed in pajamas, cleaning teeth, having a snack, reading a book, spending time cuddling and listening to music.



Reduce or remove caffeine intake

If your child is having trouble sleeping, try eliminating all foods and beverages with caffeine to see if it helps. Remember, chocolate and fizzy drinks contain caffeine.

Ensure your child's bedroom promotes relaxation

Autistic children can have sensory differences that can make it harder for them to relax, go to sleep and often stay asleep. Altering their surroundings or environment can assist. This might include reviewing the temperature, noise and brightness of the room and implementing strategies like blackout blinds or white noise machines if necessary.

Implement a bedtime reward chart

You can also implement a visual reward chart to promote following the routine. If your child has stuck to the rules of bedtime, reinforce this with rewards such as their favourite treat the following day.

Bedtime Pass

A bedtime pass can be used if a child frequently wakes at night-time. The card will allow them a request for a short time (e.g. 5 mins), which they will exchange for what they need. This can support the child in understanding when it is ok to get out of bed and when they should stay in bed to sleep. You can start with a small number of passes and decrease the amount over time if necessary. Try to be consistent with language when using the pass at night, for example:

'After you use your pass, you need to go back to bed and stay there for the rest of the night.'



Sleep Diary

A sleep diary may assist with establishing any unusual sleep patterns and help identify factors which may be contributing or helping.

Additional Information:

- Autism NI Helpline – 02890 401729 (Opt1)
- <https://www.tiredout.org.uk/>
- <https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/sleep-hub/>
- [Cerebra Sleep Service](#)