

Sleep problems in autistic children

Getting Started

Many autistic children have sleep problems. Sleep problems can include problems with:

- sleep environment
- wandering
- sleeping alone

This results in a lack of sleep for the child and their family. This Information Sheet offers some strategies that can help to improve how much and how well your child, and your family, sleep.

As every autistic person is different, you may find that some of these strategies are more helpful than others. It's worth thinking about what's causing your child's sleep problems before choosing a strategy. Some strategies take time before you'll see a change.

Sleep Environment

Some children find it difficult to fall asleep. This can be due to sensitivities to the sleep environment for example sensitivity to light, fabrics and/or noise. Using strategies to manage sensitivities can help your child fall asleep more easily.

If your child is hypersensitive to light you can block out light in their sleep environment. One way to do this is with heavy, dark curtains.

If your child is hypersensitive to tactile sensation you can check that your child's pyjamas and bedding are made of comfortable, non-irritating fabrics.

If your child is hypersensitive to noise you can block out other noises with an air purifier, fan or white noise machine.



Wandering

Many autistic children get up during the night. Below are some tips to help keep your child safe and your family well rested.

- Set up a rewards chart to reward your child for staying in bed or in the bedroom all night. This can be a good way to reinforce your child's positive behaviours. For example, your child might get a star or sticker for each night they remain in their bed, and after getting 5 stars, receive a favourite treat such as a new DVD, a book, or a visit to the park.
- Install a peep hole or other viewing device to check that your child is safe in their room if awake and out of bed during the night.
- Install a custom made alarm system to alert you when your child leaves their room at night. This allows you to redirect your child or check they're safe.

Problems Sleeping Alone

If your child is used to sleeping in your bed or having you sleep in their bed these tips might help your child to sleep alone.

- Try to set aside some "time with dad" or "time with mum" each night. Let your child know that this is instead of sleeping in your bed or you sleeping in their bed. This time might include stories, chatting, or cuddles once your child is ready for bed. You might like to place a chair next to the bed and always sit in the chair, instead of on the child's bed, or in it. This reinforces the idea that your child's bed is for your child.
- If your child won't settle to sleep without you sleeping in their bed, you can try making small changes at bedtime over a number of weeks. Start by having a parent on the bed, instead of in it, while your child is going to sleep for a few nights. Then sit next to the bed for a few nights. Next move closer to the door for a few nights and finally sit outside the door (or in the hallway) for a few nights.
- If your child is coming into your bed during the night, you can try sleeping outside their door for a few nights. If your child gets up to go to your room, and sees you sleeping outside their door they may feel secure enough to return to their own bed.

Other Suggestions

- Keep a sleep diary to record your child's sleep problems. This can help you to work out which strategies to use. If you're seeing a psychologist or other professional, take your child's sleep diary to discuss your child's sleep problems and strategies to manage them. There's an example of a sleep diary on the next page.
- Prepare to change your child's sleep routine by talking with others who care for your child. It's important that all caregivers agree on the new routine, and on how they will respond to unexpected behaviours. This helps caregivers to support each other and to be consistent in the way they respond to your child.
- Create a social script to help your child understand the need for sleep. This could include information and pictures on why we sleep, how often we sleep, where we sleep and how people know it is time to go to sleep.
- Look at why your child is having trouble sleeping. Sleep patterns can be affected by anxiety, fears, depression, and physical discomfort or pain. It can help to discuss fears, discomfort and other problems with your child through language or communication tools.
- Note that strategies to improve sleep behaviours take time. It can take 2 to 4 weeks to see an improvement.

Sleep Diary (example)

Day	Dinner (what and when)	Snack (what and when)	Time in bed	Time fell asleep	Night waking (time, how long)	Time awake in morning	Day naps (time and how long)
Monday							
Tuesday							
Wednesday							
Thursday							
Friday							
Saturday							
Sunday							

Resources

Raising Children Network (2018). *Sleep problems: children with autism spectrum disorder*. Retrieved from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/health-daily-care/sleep/sleep-problems-children-with-asd>.

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