

Sleep Advice for Parents of Autistic Teens

Sleep problems are the most common co-occurring conditions experienced by autistic individuals (Baker & Richdale, 2015). Baker et al. (2013) found that autistic teenagers are three times more likely to experience sleep difficulties in comparison to non-autistic teenagers, and that IQ does not act as a protective factor (Richdale and Schreck, 2009). Difficulties with sleep have been noted as a risk factor for suicidality in autistic individuals, therefore strategies which support sleep can support wellbeing more broadly (Hochard et al., 2020, pp. 1–10).

Autistic people may have different circadian rhythms and increased cortisol levels (our stress hormone) to non-autistic people due to differences in sensory processing. Autistic individuals who are hyposensitive to light or sounds may not pick up on the cues (such as darkness) which prepare our body for sleep. Alternatively, autistic individuals who are hypersensitive to light or sound may have learned to block sensory cues to avoid sensory overload.

Autistic teenagers may have

- Trouble falling asleep- with it taking longer than 30 minutes to fall asleep
- Difficulty staying asleep

Recent research (Pavlopoulou, 2020) suggests that good sleep hygiene for autistic teenagers may contradict recommendations for non-autistic teenagers.

The teenagers involved in this research recommended the following strategies to improve sleeping:

- Having multiple versions of the same pyjamas to provide consistent sensory input
- Removing labels from nightwear
- Deep compression on upper legs and hands
- Sleep with heavier bedding such as a double duvet, as long as it is not too hot
- Having a fluffy item to hold such as a stuffed animal
- Using a favourite smell consistently before bed such as essential oils or body lotion
- Having the edges of the bed visually defined through pillows, toys, or rails.
- Using a fan or white noise machine to block out background noise
- App-based meditation



- Allowing them decompression time after school or college, such as playing video games or watching videos, can help with counteracting sensory overload from the day

All of the teenagers in the research study said that they slept better when their parents enabled them to have some level of autonomy or control over their sleep schedule. However, the teenagers also said they benefitted from a consistent routine, but they stressed they wanted this to be a routine that they were involved in designing.

Most teenagers said they sleep better when they do not have extracurricular activities after school, highlighting that autistic individuals may struggle sleeping if they are overstimulated and not allowed sufficient time to relax and decompress.

Most teenagers said that having a conversation with their parent before bed, and a chance to discuss and process what has happened, allows them to sleep better as they are less likely to be kept awake by worrying. They also talk about the benefits of discussing and making sense of the next day. It is good practice to do this before getting in to bed, to prevent them taking those thoughts with them and this preventing them getting to sleep. Many teenagers said they sleep better when they are looking forward to the next day at school, so sleeping difficulties may reflect a worry about an aspect of school. If this is the case, trying to mitigate the problem at school is likely to also improve the sleeping difficulties. Research suggests that school-related anxiety is the biggest cause of sleep difficulties for autistic individuals.

Many teenagers talked about how engaging in exercise and self-directed hobbies increases their ability to sleep. Many teenagers talk about how engaging with a special interest or item allows them to reach a state of calm before bed. This is also known as a 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikzentmihaly, 1991). Therefore, repetitive self-regulatory behaviours should be encouraged rather than discouraged for sleep hygiene.