

Sleep advice for parents of autistic children

Sleep problems are the most common co-occurring conditions experienced by autistic individuals (Baker & Richdale, 2015).

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.

Sleep problems affect between 50 and 80% of autistic children (Sleep Foundation, Autism and Sleep Issues | Sleep Foundation). Insomnia is the most reported sleep issue: approximately, 60% of autistic children meet the criteria for insomnia (Couturier et al., 2005; Richdale & Schreck, 2009; Singer et al., 2022; Souders et al., 2009). Amongst autistic children, the most common sleep issues are bedtime resistance, sleep anxiety, difficulties falling asleep and daytime sleepiness (Chen et al., 2021).

There are a few reasons why autistic children are more likely to have sleep problems:

- Autistic children may have difficulties falling asleep or staying sleeping.
- Autistic children may move around more when sleeping which can disturb their sleep or wake them up.
- Autistic children are more likely than non-autistic children to experience parasomnias (unpleasant night-time experiences such as nightmares and sleepwalking) and may become scared of sleeping as a result (Doo & Wing, 2006; Schreck & Mulick, 2000).

Current research recommends the following strategies to support autistic children with sleep. It is important to note that as all autistic individuals have different needs, not all strategies will work for all individuals.

1. Changing mealtimes to ensure that children are not trying to go to bed either too full or too hungry. A snack or small supper before bed may help if your child does report being hungry at bedtime or through the night. Non-sugary cereal, toast, and warm milk are good examples.



2. Changing the lighting in the room the child sleeps in, and the rooms they will spend time in before sleeping, to prompt the body's natural circadian rhythms. A darker room is better for sleep, but if your child does need a night light, a small, plug-in that is away from their eyeline is the best choice for good sleep.
3. Changing the temperature in the room the child sleeps in. Some autistic individuals are more sensitive to temperature than non-autistic individuals, and we all sleep better in a cooler room. The ideal temperature is around 16-18°C.
4. Assess the sensory qualities of nightwear and bedding to ensure there are no negative textures.
5. Brushing teeth before bed can be a challenge for many children, and autistic children are more likely to struggle with using a manual toothbrush. An electric toothbrush may work better as it is more predictable and provides soothing sensory feedback.
6. Discuss any nightmares in a supportive manner to reduce anxiety.
7. Avoid talking about episodes of night terrors or sleepwalking as your child won't remember that it has happened, and it can leave them feeling anxious and result in more episodes.
8. Providing visual supports such as visual timetables of a nighttime routine or agreed actions for when it is time to get up, such as you will open the door, curtains etc.
9. Trying to maintain the same nighttime routine wherever possible. Prepare your child for any changes in routine, when you can,
10. Provide a visual timetable to give information to your child on what to do when they wake up e.g. have a drink of water from bottle next to bed, read book for 5 minutes to try and support them with falling back asleep,
11. Providing soothing sounds before bed such as mindful music. If your child likes to fall asleep to these sounds, it is best to keep them playing overnight or be set up so they can put them on again when they wake through the night,
12. Produce a sleep diary to notice if there are any triggers which affect sleep. Some autistic individuals find that they are less likely to sleep when they have had extracurricular activities.

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