

Sleep advice for the wider family unit

Research suggests that the siblings and parents of autistic individuals may also have problems with sleep.

Parents of an autistic child who has difficulties with sleep are more likely to experience sleep debt which is when you have less sleep than you need to function at an optimal level (Mindell et al., 2006). This may be because these parents are more likely to wake with their child throughout the night or may reflect the increased parental stress which is associated with having an autistic child with sleep difficulties (Hodge et al., 2013).

As a parent, you can support your own sleep hygiene by:

- Prioritising your own sleep where possible by napping through the day if your sleep will be disturbed.
- Utilising respite care to ensure that you can have undisturbed sleep where possible.
- Create a routine for when you are woken on a night which makes returning to sleep as easy as possible, for example through meditation, essential oils or a warm drink.

Moreover, the siblings of autistic individuals have been also shown to have worse sleep outcomes than the siblings of non-autistic children. Research suggests that the siblings of autistic individuals are more likely to experience insomnia and parasomnias such as nightmares, sleepwalking and night terrors than individuals who do not have an autistic sibling (Chou et al, 2012).

Research suggests that the siblings of autistic individuals may also have biological differences in their brain which affect Circadian rhythms, even if they do not display any other autistic traits (Taylor et al., 2021). This undermines previous research which suggested that the siblings of autistic individuals are only affected on an environmental level, for example by being woken up by their autistic sibling. However, environmental influences are also important.

The siblings of autistic individuals are less likely to have consistent bedtime routines as their parents may be required to provide more support to their sibling and they may struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep due to disturbances from their siblings.

To support the siblings of autistic individuals, you could:

- Speak to them about the benefit of a night-time routine and co-create a good routine so even if the parent is unable to facilitate it at bedtime, it has already been established.



- Consider ways of soundproofing so that the sibling is less likely to be woken. The sibling may also choose to wear sound-cancelling earplugs or similar through the night.
- Provide support for any sleeping issues including night terrors or insomnia by seeking medical help where appropriate.
- Create a routine for when you are woken on a night which makes returning to sleep as easy as possible, for example through meditation, essential oils or a warm drink.

Chou MC, Chou WJ, Chiang HL, Wu YY, Lee JC, Wong CC. Sleep problems among Taiwanese children with autism, their siblings and typically developing children. *Res Autism Spectr Disord.* 2012;6(2):665–672. doi: 10.1016/j.rasd.2011.09.010

Hodge D, Hoffman CD, Sweeney DP, Riggs ML. Relationship between children’s sleep and mental health in mothers of children with and without autism. *J Autism Dev Disord.* 2013;43(4):956–963. doi: 10.1007/s10803-012-1639-0.

Mindell JA, Kuhn B, Lewin DS, Meltzer LJ, Sadeh A. American Academy of Sleep Medicine, Behavioural treatment of bedtime problems and night wakings in infants and young children. *Sleep.* 2006;29(10):1263–1276.

Taylor MJ, Larsson H, Lundström S, Lichtenstein P, Butwicka A. Etiological links between autism and difficulties in initiating and maintaining sleep: a familial co-aggregation and twin study. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry.* 2021 Jul 01; doi: 10.1111/jcpp.13473

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1389945717311760?via%3Dihub>

D sibling-driven content analysis identified four major categories:

1. the impact of lack of sleep in education
2. poor sleep routines
3. night awakenings due to their ASD sibs sleep problems
4. frequent night-time help for ASD siblings to ease up their sleep problems.

Data from sleep questionnaires confirmed previous studies that night-time awaking and sleep onset delay are frequent sleep problems faced by children with ASD.

Conclusions

The current study revealed that TD siblings suffer from sleep problems due to environmental factors, namely, living with a brother or sister with autism in the same household.