

Learning to sleep through the night is something all children have to do. But for some children it can often be a difficult and seemingly impossible process. This, in turn, can have an enormous impact on the families. This guide explains what you can try to give them, and you, a more peaceful night. Helping your child to overcome their sleep disorder will not be easy. Most experts would recommend you ask for advice and support from somebody outside your immediate family such as a paediatrician.

By the age of one year, most children should be sleeping through the night. If after that time your child is regularly unable to sleep or if they have a period of good sleep which is disrupted then this constitutes a sleep disorder. It is important to be aware that all children are likely to have brief periods of poor sleep after illness, during holidays and festivals like Christmas or during periods of particular stress, such as exams or if somebody close to them is ill. After events such as these a normal sleep pattern should be established again within a few days.

It is also important to be aware of your expectations: children cannot go to bed early and wake up late. They will not remain asleep for more than a certain period of time. There are no guidelines on how long a child should sleep; how much sleep a person needs can vary considerably. On average the amount of sleep a child needs per night decreases by a quarter of an hour per year until the age of sixteen. So a five-year-old needs an average of eleven hours sleep a night and a 16-year-old needs an average of eight-and-a-half hours a night. But these are not hard and fast figures and you may have a 16-year-old who needs ten hours sleep a night or a five-year-old who only needs seven.

If you think your child may have a sleep disorder and you want to get an idea of the extent of the problem, it is a good idea to keep a sleep diary as the initial step to solving the problem.

Why keep a sleep diary?

Sleep diaries can be useful for a number of reasons.

- They can help to establish any unusual patterns of sleep. If you do decide to try any routines or behavioural modifications to help your child to sleep then the sleep diary will allow you to see if what you are doing is working consistently, sporadically or not at all.
- You can show a sleep diary to professionals involved in your child's life, such as teachers, GPs or social workers, to give them a clearer idea of the impact your child's sleep patterns are having on the child, you and your family.
- For more able children with autism a sleep diary can act as a visual reminder of their disruptive sleep patterns. They can then be used to establish incentives for staying in bed and trying to sleep, eg a gold star for every night when the child doesn't get out of bed, plus a small reward if the child doesn't get out of bed for three nights in a row.

Social sense

Children with autism may have difficulty understanding why and when they need to sleep. Problems with social cueing - that is learning why and in what order things should happen are common in autism and this may mean your child does not make the connection between their family going to bed and their own need to sleep.

Some children may find the transition from sleeping in parents rooms to their own room by themselves. This can be related to difficulty with change but also the need for reassurance around bedtime and sleeping.

Melatonin

This is a hormone secreted by the pineal gland which has been shown to regulate sleep patterns in animals. There have been studies conducted which have shown that taking melatonin supplements can help to ward off jet-lag after long journeys. It is also thought that in children with autism, their patterns of melatonin secretion may be irregular so it is not that they don't produce, it but that they don't produce it at the right times of day.

Some foods are rich in melatonin such as oats, rice, sweetcorn, tomatoes, plums, bananas and brazil nuts but current research is not clear whether a melatonin-rich diet could be effective in helping children to sleep.

Too much information

Children with autism can have significant problems with hypersensitivity to touch, visual stimuli or sound. This can be both distracting and distressing and make the process of falling asleep very difficult.

Allergy and food sensitivities

Children with autism are perhaps more likely than their peers to be sensitive to foodstuffs like sugar, caffeine and additives which can keep people awake. If your child frequently has sweet or caffeine-rich drinks and foodstuffs near bed time then it is worth checking whether this could be disturbing their sleep.

What can we do?

Removing stimulants from the diet

If you are already keeping a sleep diary then monitoring this should not be a problem. If you are not then it is advisable that you at least start keeping note of when your child sleeps so that you can monitor any improvements.

Changing your child's bedtime routine can be stressful and if they are used to having certain drinks or snacks near bedtime, suddenly switching to something different may be counter-productive. However, you could change to decaffeinated drinks, replace ordinary chocolate with sugar-free chocolate bought in health food stores, use carob powder to replace cocoa and chocolate, switch to sugar-free drinks or replace sugar in drinks with sweetener or fruit sugar, which may help some children.

Alternatively, you could try gently phasing certain foods out over a period of days or weeks so that your child is consuming less and less sugar and caffeine overall without having anything suddenly taken away from them; for example, you could offer them one biscuit instead of two, put just half a spoonful of sugar in their tea and mix decaffeinated and caffeinated drinks together. This also has the advantage of reducing your child's taste for sweet foods, which can help improve oral hygiene.

Using relaxation techniques

We all have difficulty sleeping if we are feeling wound up when we go to bed. Settling down when a lot has been happening or when we are feeling emotional can be very difficult. Children with autism may not be able to articulate their need to unwind and relax. Additionally, they may feel more anxious and confused around bedtime.

Relaxation techniques can be introduced in low-key, non-intrusive ways in many areas of family life. Some possible techniques follow.

- Introducing an hour's quiet time before the child's bedtime could serve two purposes. Doing a quiet activity, perhaps with help from you or a sibling, could help them unwind and it also provides a valuable social cue. If everyone in the house is quiet and relaxed then the message the child receives is consistent, not mixed as it is if the house is still lively and noisy even though the child is expected to sleep. Clearly, introducing a quiet period in the day may be easier said than done but you could start with small things, such as suggesting the TV/computer is turned off for an hour. It may take a while to get into this pattern but it could have a huge impact when you do. It is even worth marking this quiet time on a daily timetable so the child knows what to expect and becomes familiar with this routine.
- It may be worth providing the child with a set time to talk about their day or their worries as part of the evening routine. It may even help to have a 'worry book' or diary next to the bed so the child can write down or draw any concerns. They are then dealt with before bedtime. Alternatively, the child could have a worry box, so that worries can be written down and shut away in it.

Establishing a routine

Children with autism respond well to routine and structure because it allows them to feel safe and in control. Although sticking to routines can be frustrating during the day, setting up a routine that fits in with your family's needs and helps your child feel calm by the time they go to bed could be very helpful. To do this effectively you will need to look carefully at the routine your family follows at the moment. Things to consider include:

- Is it possible for you to eat dinner at the same time each night?
- Do you do this already?
- Is this quite late in the evening or quite early?
- Is it possible for your child with autism to have a bath at the same time each night?
- Is there anything about your child's routine that can only be done in your home? This could be something like playing on a particular climbing frame or having their own space for time out in the evenings.

Essentially, an evening routine needs to be fairly simple, with scope for flexibility. This means that if you go away, or your child goes away, the basic routine can be preserved. You could try something like:

- 6.30pm: dinner
- 7.00pm: quiet time
- 7.15pm: drink and a piece of fruit
- 7.45pm: bath
- 8.25pm: clean teeth
- 8.30pm: bedtime/sleep
- 7.30am: waking up/getting up.

It may also be worth setting aside time to prepare for the next day in the routine. This could include getting the school bag ready or making a list/timetable of things that need to be done the next day.

Common problems and possible strategies

David Bramble is a consultant psychiatrist who works for Shropshire CAMHS and specialises in the mental health of children with learning disabilities. He has a longstanding interest in children's sleep problems and works with a number of children with an ASD and their families. He suggests the following strategies to be tried for common sleep problems (taken from the 2006 BILD conference: Valuing good practice in autism):

Children who insist on parents' presence

Graded withdrawal:

1. Lie next to child on bed for three nights
2. Lie on mattress next to bed for three nights
3. Move mattress closer to door every three nights
4. Sit on chair in bedroom at door with door open for three nights
5. Sit outside door whilst still visible to child for three nights
6. Sit outside door not visible to child for three nights
7. Sit outside room with door closed for three nights.

Social stories could also be used to reassure your child that they are safe when sleeping or in bed alone. Please see the 'Useful fact sheets' section for further details.

For night waking

Scheduled awakening:

1. From sleep diary, see when child wakes up during the night
2. Set alarm clock for 30 minutes before this
3. Wake child and allow to fall back to sleep
4. If child doesn't fall back to sleep try waking 45 minutes before on the next night and experiment until you find the best time.

To ensure your child is sleepy at bed time

Restricting sleep:

1. From sleep diary, see average hours of sleep per night
2. Calculate 90% of this and make this the new sleeping time (delay bedtime and/or waking time); never restrict below five hours
3. If lying awake, occupy in another room until sleepy
4. Avoid naps in day/oversleeping at weekend
5. After a week, move settling/waking time by 15 minutes - continue until desired pattern of sleep occurs.

None of these suggestions can be guaranteed to work in themselves. You may find that a combination of them proves most effective. Close examination of your child's sleep diaries is likely to give you the greatest insight into what is causing your child's problems and which solution is most likely to work. When implementing these strategies it may be that the problem gets worse before it gets better. However, it is important to remain consistent in your approach. Rewarding and praise following a better night's sleep will help to positively reinforce it.

Safety-proofing

Making your child's room safe can be one of the easiest ways to improve your own sleep. If you can fall asleep knowing that even if your child wakes up they cannot do any harm, you are already improving your chances of not being disturbed.

In the *Parents' survival manual*, Eric Schopler quotes a number of parents who have found creative ways of achieving this. One parent installed a stable door in their child's bedroom. In the evenings after the child had gone to bed, but was still awake, the parents left the top half of the door open but the bottom half closed. The child stayed in the room but was able to call his parents should anything happen. This meant the parents had time to relax in the evenings before going to bed, could look in on their child without disturbing or distracting him and were able to respond quickly if the child had any accidents.