

# Autism and Sleep

## Improving Nighttime Routines

Sleep issues are common among Autistic children and youth, with up to 80% of Autistic preschoolers reporting challenges getting the necessary amount of sleep (Jin, 2013; Reynolds, 2019). While there is sometimes a belief that children eventually grow out of the developmental phase in which sleep disturbance are most common, these problems tend to persist and do not disappear as children grow older.

### Common Causes of Disrupted Sleep

- ◆ Issues with the routine (e.g., changing into PJs, brushing teeth, etc.)
- ◆ Difficulty staying in bed (e.g., leaving bed, calling out for parent, playing in bed, etc.)
- ◆ Challenges falling asleep
- ◆ Waking up too early or in the middle of the night



### Questions to ask when your Autistic child is having sleep issues

Is my child's sleep routine consistent?  
Do they go to bed each night at the same time? Are pre-sleep activities kept the same or do they change each night?

Does my child's sleep environment (e.g., lighting, temperature, sound, mattress/pillow quality) help or hinder them in falling asleep?  
(especially important due to sensory needs)

Do I stay with my child until they're asleep?  
If so, they may also need me to be present to help them fall back asleep when they wake in the middle of the night.

What activities does my child do right before bed? How might these activities promote or interfere with getting a good night's sleep?

### Tips for Improving Sleep for Autistic Individuals

As with all physical health issues, the first step should always be to speak with your family doctor to confirm there are no medical issues or medication(s) that may be interfering with sleep. Once this is done, caretakers can try the following:

Create a consistent nighttime routine. Use a visual schedule to display the routine can help to foster independence.

Use a bedroom pass can redeem to leave their room at night if needed, or exchanged for a reward come morning.

For night wakings, walk your child back to bed with as little social interaction possible to avoid reinforcing the behaviour.

Remember, choose your battles. Only give instructions you are willing and able to follow through with consistently.

Jin, C. S., Hanley, G. P., & Beaulieu, L. (2013). An individualized and comprehensive approach to treating sleep problems in young children. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 46(1), 161-180. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaba.16>

Reynolds, A. M., Soke, G. N., Sabourin, K. R., Hepburn, S., Katz, T., Wiggins, L. D., Schieve, L. A., & Levy, S. E. (2019). Sleep problems in 2- to 5-year-olds with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other developmental delays. *Pediatrics*, 143(3). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-0492>

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