

# PFA Tips

## Autism and Sleep Issues

### Tips for Children and Adults

Many people affected by autism suffer from sleep disturbances. Sleep issues in those who have autism go hand in hand with daytime behavioral challenges, including spikes in repetitive behaviors, communication difficulties, hyperactivity, irritability, aggression and inattention - all of which can interfere with learning and decrease overall quality of life (Mazurek 2016).



#### Tips for Children and Parents

Studies have consistently found that over half of children with autism - and possibly as many as four in five - have one or more chronic sleep problems (Cortesi 2010, Krakowiak 2008). These problems include difficulty falling asleep, frequent and prolonged waking during the night, and extremely early rising. Parents of children who have been diagnosed with ASD and are experiencing sleep problems can also use the strategies listed below to help their kids get enough rest each night.

- Many foods naturally induce sleep, and parents can include these in nightly meals and snacks to help their kids rest better. These include nuts, leafy greens, dairy products, and other products that are rich in calcium and magnesium. Tryptophan can also induce sleepiness; this amino acid is found in turkey, chicken, bananas, and beans. For children with low melatonin production, try fruits like sour cherries, grapes, and

pineapple that contain high levels of natural melatonin.

- Daytime exercise can help children feel more naturally tired at night, while physical exertion too close to bedtime can actually hinder sleep. Encourage children with ASD to get exercise during the day, but try to curtail these activities in the hours leading up to bed.

- Relaxation techniques often do wonders for children with ASD who are experiencing sleep troubles. These include meditation, listening to soft music, reading, or simply laying in bed with the lights off. Parents can also participate in these activities to guide the child along and make sure the techniques are working effectively.

- Sensory distractions are a major issue for children with ASD at all times of the day, particularly at night. To help them sleep better, test the

floor and door hinges for creaking sounds. Other sensory considerations include outside light, room temperature, and bed size.

- If the child follows an established bedtime schedule, be sure to check on them during the early stages to ensure they are actually asleep when they are supposed to be. If they are awake and seem distressed or upset about not being able to fall asleep, take a minute to reassure them that everything is all right. Many children with ASD respond well to physical touching, so also try patting them on the head, rubbing their shoulders, or giving them a high-five to help ease their worries.

#### Tips for Adults

Strategies adults can use to minimize sleep issues and get a good night's sleep on a regular basis include:

- Create a relaxing bedroom environment that is conducive to sleep.

## Autism and Sleep Issues – continued

Beds should only be used for sleep and sex, so refrain from activities like eating, watching television, and reading in bed; confining these activities to other areas of the house will help establish a more sleep-friendly atmosphere in the bedroom.

- Eat balanced dinners and snacks prior to bedtime, and avoid substances like alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and sugar as much as possible.
- Electronic devices like TVs, computers, tablets, and smartphones emit 'blue light' that can hinder melatonin production and increase sleep latency. Recent studies suggest that people should avoid all electronics for at least one hour before bedtime.
- Avoid napping for more than thirty minutes during the day, and less

than three hours before bedtime.

- Fluorescent and LED lights also emit blue light, as well as 'artificial light', which can also cut down on melatonin production. Outside lights may affect sleep onset and maintenance, as well. For optimal bedroom conditions, consider installing adjustable lights that can be dimmed; this will help boost melatonin production. Also make sure the curtains are drawn in order to block outside lights, as well as daylight when morning arrives.
- Make sure the bedroom is temperature-controlled, and that the thermostat is set to a comfortable level. Don't be afraid to adjust the temperature to correspond with seasonal changes.
- If nightly discomfort is an issue, then it might be time to replace the mattress. Most mattresses

need to be tossed out after seven years of consistent use. Sleep position may also be a factor, since people who sleep on their sides and backs tend to be more comfortable on mattresses made of memory foam or latex, which are designed to conform to the contours of the human body and provide spinal support. Innerspring mattresses, by comparison, offer little spinal support or contouring, and are less suitable for most side- and back-sleepers.

- Keep a sleep diary. This will help track nightly patterns and changes, and can be a useful reference for physicians. Sleep diaries are often required as part of CBT and light therapy.

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