

Understanding Sleep and Autism Spectrum Disorders

About 1/2 - 2/3 of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have some type of difficulty with sleep. The most common issues are trouble falling asleep at bedtime, trouble staying asleep throughout the night, waking up too early, and overall sleeping less than is typical for their age.

Why do more children with ASD have sleep problems? Research has shown there are many reasons. There may be biological differences in some children with ASD that affect how their body produces melatonin, the hormone that plays a role in our sleep. Children with ASD are also at an increased risk of certain medical concerns, like seizures or constipation, and may be more likely to be on medications that could impact sleep. Related to the characteristics of ASD, they may have a harder time understanding caregiver's explanations of what they are supposed to do when they go to bed and may not be able to communicate why it is hard for them (for example, they are scared, cold, etc.). They may also have a different response to some of the things in their bedroom environment (for example, the texture of the sheets, the light coming through the window, etc.), may have a harder time "turning their minds and bodies off" than some kids, and may have more rigid ways of wanting to do things around bedtime. All of these things may have set up sleep habits that are making it harder for them to sleep well. The good news is that, even if these other factors are impacting your child's sleep, changing sleep habits can help them sleep better!

In addition to changing sleep habits, there may be times when it is important to see a medical professional regarding your child's sleep concerns.

- If you are concerned that some of the medications your child is taking may be affecting their sleep, you should share that concern with the doctor that prescribed or recommended that medication.
- If you are concerned that your child may have another medical condition that is affecting their sleep, like seizures or constipation, they may need to be seen by a specialist who can treat those issues.
- If you are observing symptoms like snoring or gasping for breath while sleeping, they may need to be seen by a sleep specialist who may order a sleep study or other tests to see why this is happening.
- If you try the strategies we discuss to help your child sleep and they are still having trouble, they may need to see a sleep specialist to see if there is any underlying medical concern and to see if any type of medication may be needed to help sleep.

Improving sleep can positively impact your child's daytime behaviors, such as irritability, hyperactivity, inattention, and repetitive behaviors. It has also been proven to help overall family well-being, caregiver stress, and sense of competence in being able to work on other areas of concern for your child and family.

