

Helping Your Child (and Family) Sleep Better

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES



When a child has difficulty with sleep, it impacts the entire family. Sleep is associated with mood, learning, and daytime behavior. If you have a child with a developmental disability who also has difficulty with sleep, you are not alone.

What is a sleep disorder?

Many parents of children with autism and other developmental disabilities report concerns regarding their child's sleep. Sleep disorders include difficulty falling asleep and/or staying asleep, waking too early, and being overly tired during the day.

Are sleep disorders treatable?

The good news is that sleep disorders respond well to treatment. While some symptoms such as snoring, gasping for breath while sleeping, and/or bedwetting at night may need further evaluation and treatment from a sleep specialist, symptoms such as difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep may respond to behavioral interventions. Behavioral interventions address daytime and evening habits and the timing of sleep.

Behavioral sleep interventions

Daytime Habits - The things we do during the day have an impact on sleep. Regular exposure to sunlight during the day and darkness at night help establish a wake/sleep

pattern. Daily exercise helps children fall asleep quicker and experience deeper sleep. Caffeine is another daytime habit that affects sleep. If it is not possible to take caffeine out of your child's diet, consider limiting caffeine in the late afternoon and evening hours.

Evening Habits - Challenges with communication may impact evening habits. You can communicate that it is time to wind down and prepare for sleep by turning down the lights and providing calm and relaxing activities in the hour before bedtime. Stimulating activities activate the brain and make sleep more difficult.

A bedtime routine is another tool that can help communicate that it is time to get ready for bed. A bedtime routine is a short, predictable series of activities that the child does before sleep. The goal is to provide calm and relaxing activities that help the child transition between busy daytime activities and sleep. Some parents use visual supports to communicate the sequence of bedtime routine activities to their child. Visuals can help parents communicate what they expect and can promote appropriate, positive ways to communicate. Examples of bedtime visual supports are included on the next page..

Timing of Sleep - When children have difficulty falling asleep, it is tempting to put them to bed earlier. It may actually be more helpful to put the child to bed later in the evening. While it may also be tempting to let the child sleep later on weekends and "catch up" on their sleep, regular bedtime and wake times are associated with better sleep habits.

Strategies to Improve Sleep in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

A sleep strategies toolkit was developed at Vanderbilt with funding from Autism Speaks. It is free and downloadable on the Autism Speaks website. Though written with individuals with autism in mind, the toolkit will be helpful for a variety of individuals. See www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/atnair-p-strategies-improve-sleep-children-autism

Please see reverse.



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RESOURCES

Examples of bedtime visual supports:



If you have concerns about your child's sleep, help is available.

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. (615) 322-8240, toll-free (866) 936-8852, vkc.vumc.org

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website includes a directory of more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county, topic of interest, and other filters. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, TNPathfinder.org

Other Resources

- **Junior League Family Resource Center, Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt**
www.childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/information/family-resource-center
- **National Institute of Health - National Center on Sleep Disorders Research**
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncsdr/
- **Sleep and Health Education Program**
healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/portal/
- **Sleep Strategies for Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder**
vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/resources/sleepasdteens.pdf
- **Strategies to Improve Sleep in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Parent's Guide**
A sleep strategies toolkit was developed at Vanderbilt with funding from Autism Speaks. Though written with individuals with autism in mind, the toolkit will be helpful for a variety of individuals.
vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/resources/sleepasd.pdf
- **Vanderbilt Sleep Disorders Center**
www.vanderbilthealth.com/service-line/sleep-disorders-center
- **WebMD Sleep Disorders Health Center**
www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/

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