

My Child Won't Sleep

Advice for Parents of Children with Autism



As a parent, we all know that children sometimes struggle to sleep, but for children with autism (and their parents) this can become a real problem.

Sleep is a really important part of physical and psychological wellbeing – we need it in order to grow, fight off illness, learn and feel emotionally strong. If your child isn't sleeping well, they may not be able to function as well as they might and this can lead to problems both at home and at school.

For children with autism, lack of sleep can have a real impact on their behaviour and ability to cope with the stresses of daily life. This also affects their siblings, friends, teachers and parents sometimes making life very stressful.

Why Can't My Child Sleep?

One of the most common reasons for any child not being able to sleep is environmental. For example, they may have too many toys and games in their bedroom that stimulate them.

Another common reason is behavioural shaping. For example, if you rock your child to sleep every night, they will find it difficult to get to sleep without you there. Equally, if they wake up in the night and you are not there to rock them again, they may struggle to sleep again and may become distressed.

Children with autism face further difficulties. They often suffer with disturbed natural wake/sleep cycles or have abnormal melatonin levels – this is the hormone that regulates sleep.

They can struggle with social cueing, which means they may not understand why and when to sleep. Try explaining to older children what sleep is and why we need it, or even modelling the process of going to sleep at a certain time until this becomes habit.

Children with autism may become anxious at bedtime and struggle with sensory issues, such as bright lights or even the feel of the material their pyjamas are made of.

What Can I Do?

- Try keeping a sleep diary so that you can keep track of any patterns or triggers.
- Be clear in your expectations at bedtime and do not change routines.
- Do not let your child eat too late and keep stimulating play to a minimum in the evening.
- Warn your child that it will soon be bedtime so that there are no surprises.
- Have a consistent and relaxing bedtime routine that lasts about 20 – 30 minutes – give your child a warm drink and read a book together; keep things quiet and non-stimulating.
- Make sure that your child is comfortable – they may not like the smell of wash powder, the fabric of the duvet cover, or the brightness of a bedside lamp. If it's an issue for them, change it.
- Try using a weighted blanket – this is a special blanket that is filled with beans and can soothe a child.
- Keep a close check on the temperature of your child's bedroom and try to settle on an optimum level.
- Try using blackout blinds if your child is unsettled by light creeping into the room.
- Block out stimulating noises by letting your child listen to music through earphones or simply let them wear ear defenders.
- Set up a reward system so that your child feels a sense of achievement when they successfully settle into sleep.

