



The Relationship Between Autism Spectrum Disorders and Sleep

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Sleep problems are common in typically developing children and children with Asperger's and ASD. These problems often appear as difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking too early. In children with ASD, there is an estimated 73% rate of sleep challenges, many of which are associated with some of the common features of ASD. For example, children with ASD tend to have sensitivity to stimuli, which can interfere with sleep onset at bedtime and after waking during the night. Children who have sensitive hearing may be more easily aroused by noises in the house, which can be a source of sleep disruption. Touch sensitivity can affect responses to bedding or sleep clothes. Much of our circadian rhythm is established through light exposure, and children who struggle with being in the dark are more likely to experience challenges with sleep continuity. Children with ASD can struggle with self-soothing and emotional regulation, which can be an essential element to bedtime routine. Additional sleep challenges in ASD can include co-sleeping, with more parents of children with Asperger's reporting reactive co-sleeping. Lastly, children with ASD tend to sleep less than the norms for their age, and adjusting expectations for sleep can have a meaningful impact on helping them to sleep well.

10 Tips to Improve Sleep in ASD:

1. Provide a comfortable sleep environment. Room should be cool, quiet and dark.
2. Allow for a sense of containment while sleeping- consider weighted bedding, smaller sleeping environment, and even a sleeping bag as is comfortable.
3. Create a continuous dark period for sleep. Light will interrupt sleep cycle and can be a source of perpetual awakening.
4. Establish a stable bedtime routine that does not take more than 15-30 minutes to complete.
5. Follow the same order in the bedtime routine and do not vary in steps toward the bed. Bedtime routine should always start outside of the bedroom and end in the bedroom, with no exits upon reaching the bedroom.

6. Determine which events are calming and which events tend to cause increased stimulation. Older children can often identify the activities that they find to be soothing.
7. Maintain a consistent bedtime that allows for optimum sleep. Children can get increasingly active if their bedtime is delayed.
8. Maintain the same wake schedule regardless of the sleep from the preceding night.
9. AM exposure to sunlight can help reinforce a normal sleep schedule and improve mood.
10. Stable meals through the course of the day help to reinforce stable sleep at night.