

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/science/resources-programs/autism-treatment-network/tools-you-can-use/sleep-tool-kit

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, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. The following are some of the ways the Center's programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder is a free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish. It connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has over 3,000 agencies searchable by TN county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities, TN Department of Health, and the TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Contact www.familypathfinder.org, (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

Other Resources

- **Health Library, Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt** Find information and resources concerning sleep challenges from the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt. www.childrenshospital.vanderbilt.org/library/

- **National Institute of Health - National Center on Sleep Disorders Research**
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncsdr/
- **Sleep and Health Education Program**
<http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/portal//>
- **Sleep Strategies for Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder** vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/assets/files/resources/sleepassteens.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.mc.vanderbilt.edu/assets/files/resources/sleepasdpdf
- **Vanderbilt Sleep Center** This Center provides pediatric sleep evaluations and treatment. Call (615) 322-4000, or see www.vanderbilthealth.com/sleepcenter/22682
- **WebMD Sleep Disorders Health Center**
www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/

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