

Autism and Sleep

Many Autistic people have trouble sleeping

There are a range of reasons for this

Problems with sleep can be an issue for both autistic adults and children

Sleep issues in autistic children is disruptive for the parents who can find their own sleep is severely affected

Why might an autistic child struggle to sleep?

- Have difficulties settling, winding down and going to sleep
- Waking repeatedly during the night, and have difficulty getting back to sleep/self settling after waking
- Increased anxiety or an inability to relax causing insomnia
- **Social cueing problems, where an autistic person doesn't make the connection between others in the house going to bed to sleep and their own need to sleep.**
- Irregular secretion of the sleep hormone melatonin, which helps regulates sleep patterns
- Neurological conditions e.g. epilepsy
- **Sensory differences such as increased sensitivity to**
 - **blue light from smart phones, laptops and other screens,**
 - **certain sounds or white noise, which may be upsetting or distracting.**
 - **different textures for example bedding, pjs, labels etc.....**
 - **smells.**
- Problems caused by food allergies, which could cause gastrointestinal issues and discomfort, or increased sensitivity to caffeine or other stimulants, which can disturb sleep
- Hypersomnia - sleeping too much. Increased exhaustion could be caused by the additional stress autistic people experience in social situations.

So How can we help families ?

Here are some strategies that may help. You will need to adapt them to suit the child's needs and level of understanding.

- Explain sleep - social stories, visual supports
- Keep a sleep diary
- Establish a reassuring routine
- Make the bedroom more comfortable
- Diet
- Medication
- Parent's need to sleep too

Scenario – for discussion

Poppy is 9 years old she is autistic and has learning difficulties she attends a special school.



Poppy lives with her mum and dad and older brother in a terraced house.

Poppy's mum reports that she is exhausted, she has not slept properly in her own bed since poppy was 4 years old and it is having a toll on the whole family.

Mum sleeps every night in Poppy's room on a z-bed so she is available to Poppy when she wakes up and is able to try and keep Poppy quiet so she does not disturb the household or the neighbours (who often complain about the noise)

- Poppy eats well, mum reports she has a sweet tooth however she tries to limit sweet foods where possible. Poppy drinks well.
- **Current after school and bedtime routine**
- 4pm - Home from school, play or watch TV
- 5pm – supper
- 5.30pm – watch TV or play with toys
- 6pm – bath – dad is usually home for bath time and has a fun time with Poppy who enjoys lots of splashing – bath time can be difficult to end
- 7pm ish – 8pm – into bed (Poppy will only get into bed with mum in room) dad never puts Poppy to bed as she will scream and cry
- Between 8 –9 pm Poppy goes to sleep with mum stoking legs and arms – Poppy always takes a drink to bed with her so she can sip it over night if required.

- Poppy can wake up to 3-4 times a night – 4-5 times a week.
- Mum reports if she wakes before midnight she will usually go back to sleep with stroking of leg and reassurance however will again wake multiple times
- If she wakes for first time at 2am she can insist on getting up and going down stairs to watch TV she will remain awake until morning running around
- Mum does all the nights with Poppy as dad works and mum does not want his sleep disturbed and Poppy now will not entertain the idea of dad putting her to bed
- School report she can be cross during the day and have poor behaviours of running around and upsetting/hitting other children shouting and being disruptive.

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- Is there any thing from the scenario that stands out to you?
 - Is there any other information you would like to find out
 - Can you think of some simple strategies as a starting point

Some Ideas to think about :

- **Current after school routine** does not have much interaction with parents. Poppy does her own thing watching TV and playing alone
 - Maybe mum can spend some time with her watching TV together of simple activities. If mum needs this time sort out supper maybe TV time and then after supper no more TV but some simple calming activities such as colouring or puzzles
- **Bath time** seems to be very stimulating does she need a bath every night ? Can bath time be before supper ? Maybe the excitement of dad can be a little calmer.

- **The Golden hour – calm and quiet activities** - Maybe dad can interact with a calm activity, colouring or reading a story, or threading blocks or beads. Think about **sensory** activities calming such as weighted blanket, soft blankets, etc.... Sounds music things Poppy enjoys that don't over stimulate her.

- **The bedtime routine**

Mum and dad need to have a routine they agree on and stick to. Poppy needs structure

- A social story – including dad putting her to bed
- Symbols for poppy to use to reinforce the routine and what Poppy need to do now and next
- Quiet story in bed or listening to a recorded story before lights out.
- Look at bed room environment noise, lighting, is the room a calm space are all toys and books put away (reduce distractions)
- Rewards, bed time/night time passes
- Praise ' I love the way you cleaned your teeth without me asking etc:...
- Maybe think about moving bedtime a little later nearer 9pm as that's when she is currently falling to sleep this can be moved slowly back
- No soothing to sleep with stroking as when Poppy wakes she is unable to self sooth back to sleep
- No drink if possible however if required only water

A routine will be trial and error and adjustments can be made.

**Mum and dad need to be aware that it will take time weeks or months but it will be worth it.....
They will need to support each other as it can be tough at times**