

How to Use Sleep Strategies to Help Your Child with Autism

DISCLAIMER: This summary provides overall strategies you can use to help your child. For more details, it may be helpful to read the Strategies to Improve Sleep Tool Kit and to communicate with your child's clinician about your concerns.

Who would benefit from the Autism Learning Health Network Sleep Tip Sheet?

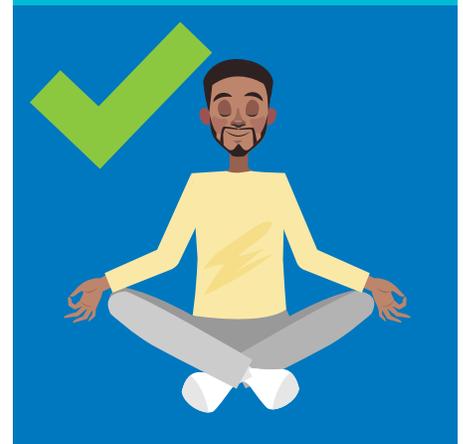
If your child has trouble falling asleep, sleeping through the night, waking during the night and waking too early, these tips may help.

How to select a sleep program for your child:

- **Choose ideas** that work well with your family's lifestyle.
- **Begin a new sleep program** only when you have time and energy to see if it will work.
- **Try one small change** at first and slowly incorporate additional changes one at a time.
- **Be patient** – it can take weeks or months of carrying out strategies to see a change.

How to keep a regular routine and daytime habits:

- **Keep the same wake time** and bedtime seven days a week, as much as possible.
- **Choose a bedtime** when your child is likely to be tired.
- For young children, **identify a regular nap schedule**, with naps ending no later than 4 p.m. Try to avoid “unplanned” naps.
- **Avoid heavy meals or snacks** before bed. A light snack with carbohydrates, such as cheese and crackers, may help your child sleep.
- **Expose your child to natural light** when your child wakes up – for example, open the curtains in their bedroom. Dim the lights in the house in the hours before bed.
- **Promote exercise** during the day, but not during the two to three hours before bedtime.
- **Avoid all caffeine products**, such as chocolate, soda, tea or coffee. Their stimulating effects can last up to 12 hours.
- **Reduce and/or avoid daytime bedroom use** for things like homework, playing or time out.



How to establish a regular bedtime routine:

- **Start a short and predictable routine** 15 to 30 minutes before bedtime. Use the same order every night to help your child relax and get ready for sleep.
- **Place calm, soothing activities** at the end of the routine, like reading a book with dimmed lights.
- **Avoid stimulating activities**, such as watching movies, playing video games or other screen time activities as part of the routine. Try to avoid physical activities like running or jumping 30 minutes before bedtime.
- **Consider creating visual supports**, like a chart with pictures of your child's bedtime routine, to support and communicate your expectations around bedtime.

How to create a comfortable and consistent sleep environment:

- Make sure your child's **sleeping space is not too hot or cold** and keep the room quiet and dark. Consider adding white noise if needed throughout the night.
- **Caregivers can add a night light** if your child needs one, but leave the night light on all night.
- Consider adding **heavy window coverings** to block outside light.
- Use **materials for bedding and sleep clothes** that work for your child's preferences.

How to teach your child to fall asleep alone:

- Caregivers should **gradually fade out of the room**. Try sitting on a chair by your child's bed instead of lying in the bed. Gradually move the chair further away from the bed every few nights, with the ultimate goal to move the chair completely out of the room.
- **Keep all interactions with your child brief** and boring if you need to go back in the room. For example, you can say, "You are ok, go to sleep," and leave again.
- Try to wait longer between each visit to the room.
- Consider using a bedtime pass, which your child can exchange for one visit from caregiver, a drink of water, or an extra hug or kiss.
- You can also use these same strategies if your child calls out in the night for you.

For more information:

Visit autismspeaks.org/tool-kit to find all of our tool kits, including *ATN/AIR-P Strategies to Improve Sleep in Children with Autism*.

