

Autism and Sleep

Autism NI staff are experienced in working with autism and are Sleep Scotland trained. We aim to assist families develop a healthy sleep routine, reduce sleep difficulties enabling the whole family to get more sleep. Given autism is unique to each child, so too will be the family's individual circumstances and experiences of sleep differences. Some children simply won't settle, some waken every hour and others who think it is time to get up in the middle of the night. There may be a range of reasons why many on the autism spectrum may have varied sleep patterns throughout their lives. A sleep diary may assist with establishing any unusual sleep patterns and help identify factors which may be contributing. If you decide to implement strategies, a sleep diary is also a great way of gauging how effective they are.

Sleep Tips

- Make sure daytime activities promote nighttime sleeping. Add exercise to your child's daily routine. Regular exercise can help your child sleep better during the night. Be sure to schedule exercise early in the day, too much stimulation close to bedtime may make it more difficult for your child to fall asleep.
- Eliminate or reduce caffeinated foods and beverages. For some, caffeine usually remains in your system for 3 to 5 hours, but for some this can be as long as 12 hours. If your child is having trouble sleeping, try eliminating all foods and beverages with caffeine to see if it helps. Remember, chocolate contains caffeine.
- Have your child wake up at the same time each morning and, if old enough, eliminate daytime naps.
- Pay attention to those things that tend to arouse your child, such as video games, loud movies, television shows or certain stimulating activities. End these activities before dinner to allow your child to have several hours of calming activities before bedtime.
- Try not to have your child play in their bedroom throughout the day, the room needs to be associated with sleep.

Your child's bedroom should be soothing and promote relaxation

Autistic children can have sensory differences, these often make it harder for them to relax, go to sleep and often stay asleep. Altering their surroundings or environment can assist. It may help to: -

- Pay attention to the temperature in your child's room. Remember, they may not respond to temperature in the same way as you. Think about what temperature they feel most comfortable with during the day and try to replicate that in their room.
- Use sheets and blankets that are comfortable for your child. Sheets that may seem okay to you may feel scratchy for your child, keeping them awake.

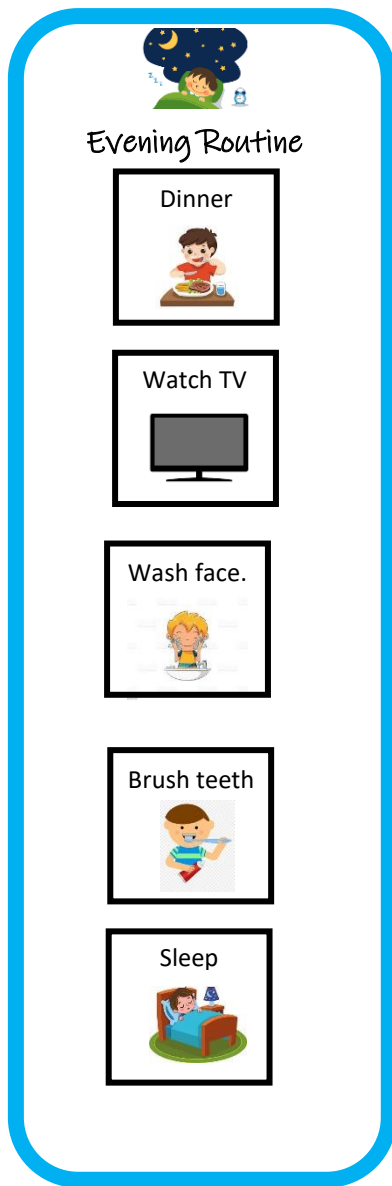
- Depending on your child's preference, make sure the lighting in the room promotes sleep. They may want nightlight or may prefer a room completely dark. There may be a streetlight streaming in through the window that could be eliminated with blinds, or they may need some type of light to keep fears at bay. Find out what works best for your child.
- Eliminate or reduce noises. While you may not be able to stop all household noises, using a white noise machine, placing a fan in your child's room, or using ear plugs may help them block out the external noises, reduce stimulation and help them sleep better.
- Reduce smells entering the room by closing the door, or by using scented products your child finds relaxing.
- Pay attention to the colours and decor of the room. Your child's room should promote calmness. Look around to see if changing the environment (removing toys from bed) may help them sleep better.
- Use relaxation methods such as quiet time, having a bath, massage, or time to unwind before bedtime.

Create a bedtime routine.

Some children will find the transition to bedtime difficult; this can be related to change. Establish a basic ordered routine which you can implement with visual timetables to make it easier. Your child may require reassurance, in addition to the tips below: -

- Use a social story (developed by Carol Gray) to help explain sleep.
- Choose a bedtime that is reasonable and that you can implement with consistency without causing disruption or hardship to you and your family. Stick with the bedtime every night.
- Limit the use of screen time, up to an hour or two prior to bedtime. This includes T.V, computer, tablet, and smart phones as these can inhibit the production of the sleep hormone melatonin.
- Create a bedtime routine with pleasant and calming activities and, depending on your child's abilities, write it down or use pictures to denote the steps of the routine so they know what to expect. Bedtime routines can include bathing, getting dressed in pyjamas, having a snack, reading a book such as (*The Rabbit Who Wants To fall Asleep*), spending time cuddling and listening to music. Use activities that your child enjoys.
- Eliminate activities that are upsetting to your child. For example, if your child becomes highly agitated or upset during bath time, consider moving baths to the morning instead of right before bedtime.
- Use a visual to make the routine easier to follow and implement positive reinforcement such as a reward chart.

Bedtime Visual – Evening routine schedule



Evening Routine

Dinner

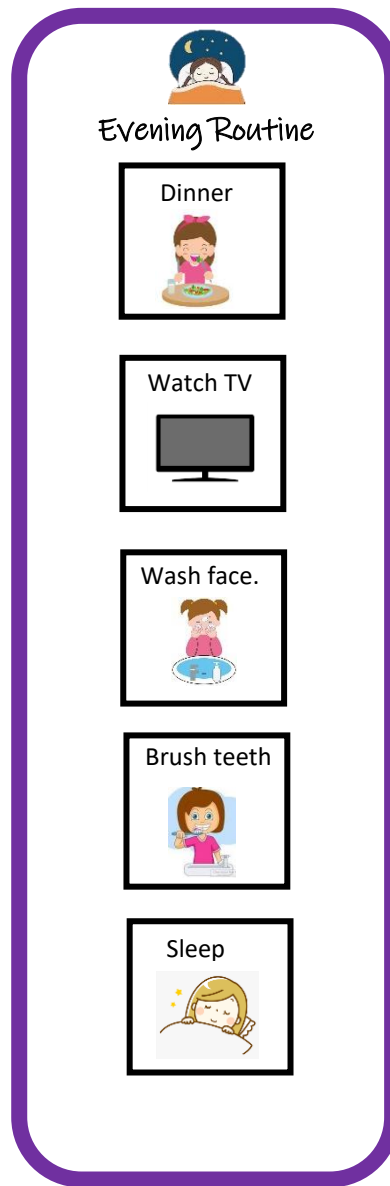
Watch TV

Wash face.

Brush teeth

Sleep

This visual schedule for a boy is contained within a blue rounded rectangle. It features an icon of a boy sleeping under a starry night sky at the top. Below the title 'Evening Routine', there are five sequential steps, each in a black-bordered box: 'Dinner' with an illustration of a boy eating, 'Watch TV' with a television set, 'Wash face.' with a boy at a sink, 'Brush teeth' with a boy brushing, and 'Sleep' with a boy in bed.



Evening Routine

Dinner

Watch TV

Wash face.

Brush teeth

Sleep

This visual schedule for a girl is contained within a purple rounded rectangle. It features an icon of a girl sleeping under a starry night sky at the top. Below the title 'Evening Routine', there are five sequential steps, each in a black-bordered box: 'Dinner' with an illustration of a girl eating, 'Watch TV' with a television set, 'Wash face.' with a girl at a sink, 'Brush teeth' with a girl brushing, and 'Sleep' with a girl in bed.

Bedtime Pass

A bedtime pass can be used on children from around the age of 3 until 8 or 9, although these ages will obviously depend on your child's developmental abilities. The child can use this card if they frequently wake at nighttime. The card will allow them a request for a short time (e.g. 5 mins)

Explain to your child they will get one pass per night. After you go to bed, you can use the pass for one free trip out of the room, explain that if they use the pass, then they need to give it to you and go straight back to bed.

Say something like, 'After you use your pass, you need to go back to bed and stay there for the rest of the night.'

If your child has stuck to the rules of the bedtime pass reinforce this with rewards such as their favourite treat.

Feel free to cut around these and use them at home or try making your own, personalise it according to what your child would typically get out of bed for.

Bedtime Pass



With this pass I can get:

- A hug from mum or dad
- A kiss from mum or dad
- Talk to mum or dad for a short time.

Then I must go back to my room.

Bedtime Pass



With this pass I can get:

- A hug from mum or dad
- A kiss from mum or dad
- Talk to mum or dad for a short time.

Then I must go back to my room.

For additional information, please see the links below: -

<https://www.tiredout.org.uk/>

<https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/sleep-hub/>

[Cerebra Sleep Service](#)

[Autism NI Helpline – 02890 401729 \(Opt1\)](#)

Always consult your Health Visitor or G.P, your child and you may need additional support that only they can provide advice on.