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Creating A Healthy Sleep Routine For Children With Autism

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It takes a person with autism approximately [11 minutes](#) longer to fall asleep than someone without it, according to Autism Parents magazine. They are also more likely to wake up during the night and to have a bad night's sleep overall. When you combine this with a host of common [co-occurring illnesses](#) that people with autism are likely to have, which can also trouble sleep, your child with autism may have difficulty getting the restorative benefits of sleep. In the long run, this can lead to both cognitive and physical [difficulties](#) for children.

Fortunately, this is an area where parents can help. Creating a healthy sleep routine and sleep environment for your child can make a world of difference, helping them settle into sleep every night and get their much-needed rest.

Sleep Schedule

Maintaining a regular sleep schedule will help your child get to sleep at an appropriate hour every night, as well as instilling healthy sleep behaviors for their future. Bear in mind that while adults should be getting seven to eight hours a night, children need quite a bit more. Review this chart of [age-appropriate bedtimes](#) to give you an idea of what you need to be

aiming for. Of course, you will need to adjust depending on when your child needs to wake up every morning.

If your child needs to fall asleep by 7:30, you need to make sure they are ready by 7:00 or 7:15. It's always best to give yourself some leeway, so that your child has plenty of time to relax.

If your child is having difficulty sleeping on their own, do not simply give in and let them sleep with you indefinitely. They need to get used to sleeping in their own room, both for their healthy development and to allow for your different sleep schedules. Instill some [rules](#) for bedtime:

- You will stay with them until they are feeling sleepy but leave before they fall asleep.
- They cannot cry out for you while you are out of the room.
- You will check in with them every 10 minutes to make sure everything is okay and to reassure them if needed.
- Check-ins will not last more than a couple of minutes.

This may be difficult at first, but eventually the check-ins will become increasingly unnecessary. Children who don't like sleeping alone are often scared, so by checking in regularly you are providing them with some reassurance that everything is going to be OK.

Sleep Environment

If your child is waking often or waking up groggy, quality of sleep could be the issue. It may be time to analyze their room's environment to ensure your child is comfortable. Make sure there is air moving, adequate lighting (but not too much), proper bedding, and a comfortable mattress.

If your child is a [hot sleeper](#), it's important to make sure his or her mattress has breathability as well as heat conductivity and retention. Consider turning on a fan or leaving the window partly open during the night, although you need to consider whether they would have a problem with the noise for either of these options.

If they are sensitive to certain textures, make sure you provide bedding that they enjoy the feeling of - use the texture of their favorite clothing, or take them to the shop with you to feel some different options. Some children could benefit from a compression bed sheet or weighted blanket, which provides a soothing downward pressure that makes them feel safe.

In terms of lighting, you may have to play around with a few options before you land on what makes your child most comfortable. After all, people with autism have widely differing triggers and preferences. Installing controllable lighting that can be easily dimmed and brightened as needed might be a good option for your child's bedroom. Many of these also offer changing colors, which can be great for kids. Blackout curtains are also helpful, since they keep out light from outside and keep the lighting strictly under their control. Glow-in-the-dark features could help a child feel safe if they wake up during the night.

Finally, consider the bed itself. Many people with autism find that traditional beds are not the most comfortable option for them since they like to feel enclosed and protected. There are several types of cots and pods that create an enclosed space around the bed. This can also be a significant relief for parents whose children are prone to roaming during the night and who tend to stay up worrying they will somehow injure themselves.

Other Factors for Healthy Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep is not just about what happens during the night. Your child's daytime routine and behaviors could make a significant difference to their ability to fall asleep at night. For instance, [regular exercise](#) is directly correlated with quality of sleep in children, as well as having a host of additional [benefits](#) for their cognitive and physical health and development.

Additionally, exercise can help with stress by gradually reducing the amount of cortisol released by the brain in stressful situations. According to research, stress is the major [contributing factor](#) to the gastrointestinal issues often experienced by people with autism, which can keep them up at night.

Overall, the best thing you can do to help your child get a good night's sleep is to create a calming and safe environment for them in their bedroom. The happier and calmer they feel when they go to their room for the night, the quicker they will relax enough to fall asleep. Include them in the decision-making process and encourage them to express what it is they like and don't like about their sleeping environment.

In terms of their schedule, remember to plan for an adequate amount of sleep hours for their age and make sure they are comfortable and settled before their ideal bedtime. These small changes can make a huge difference to an autistic child's sleep routine and, by extension, to their overall health and well-being.