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Welcome

It is sometimes difficult to find a trustworthy source for answers to complex questions about your child's health and development, so we provide this newsletter to bring you up-to-date information from specialists and researchers at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. For more information about the clinic or if you have a question about your child's development, please call the Autism Warm Line at 323-361-6102.

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To make an appointment, call the Autism Warm Line at 323.361.6102, email BooneFetterClinic@chla.usc.edu or visit CHLA.org/AUTISM.

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Sleep Hygiene for Children With Autism

An Interview with Sally Ward, MD, and Iris Perez, MD



Are sleep problems common in children with autism?

Sally Ward, MD: Yes, in general, children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have more sleep-related problems than typically developing children. Many parents of children on the autism spectrum report sleep problems, such as resistance to going to sleep or sleeping alone, waking up often or sleepwalking during the night, and being groggy in the morning. Research shows that about half of school-age children with ASD have trouble sleeping, compared to about one-fourth of typically developing children.

What are the different types of sleep problems that they can have?

Iris Perez, MD: There are many types of sleep problems, as well as other issues that can disturb sleep. Some children have trouble falling asleep at night, but sleep soundly once they do. Others may fall asleep without any difficulty, but wake

often during the night and can't get restful sleep. And some will have trouble both falling and staying asleep. We need to get enough sleep for optimal health, mood and behavior. A child having trouble sleeping is also stressful for parents, so it is important to find solutions that work for the family.

Are the sleep problems of children with autism different from those of other kids?

SW: The main difference is that kids with ASD have sleep problems more often. Depending on the individual child, this may be due to behavioral issues related to ASD, which can disrupt getting to sleep, or could be the result of differences in the parts of the brain that control sleeping patterns. For instance, early-morning awakenings may be related to how the brain controls sleep in children with ASD.

What are common behavioral issues?

IP: The most common problem is simply refusing to go to sleep at night. Instead, they want to play, watch TV, hear another story or do anything other than go to bed! Some children may need to be rocked or patted, or have someone lie next to them before falling asleep. Others may wake up easily during the night or want to sleep somewhere else other than in bed. It is difficult for the family,

because everyone wakes up tired from not sleeping well. Parents are tempted to let their children nap during the day, but this only contributes to more problems at night.

The most important thing to do is to develop a consistent routine around sleep, maintaining what we call good "sleep hygiene." Sleep hygiene is all about keeping a daily routine and providing an environment that promotes sleep. For example, the bed should be used only for sleeping; avoid watching TV or having snacks in bed. Consider taking the TV and other electronics out of the bedroom. A calm, supporting and consistent bedtime routine allows a child to wind down and get ready for sleep. Also, there should be a consistent wake-up time every day, and limited naps for older children. The sleep schedule should be the same on weekends and school nights.

What should a normal night's sleep be like?

SW: It depends on the age. For toddlers, a normal night's sleep should last about 12 to 13 hours, with one or two daytime naps. At this age, they are transitioning from crib to bed, so some behavioral issues may arise related to changing their sleep space.

During childhood, nine to 11 hours is normal and napping is rare. At this time, the sleep pattern becomes more stable and consistent from one night to the next. For children with autism, early childhood is a crucial time for developing a consistent sleep routine and supporting good sleep hygiene habits. That means a regular bedtime, and limiting distractions from sleep like TV or the computer. Additionally, the child should sleep in his or her own bed.

What types of treatments are available for kids with autism who have sleep problems?

IP: If you have a child with ASD who has trouble getting a good night's sleep, there are both behavioral and medical treatments



available. Your child may need to see a sleep specialist to determine the underlying reasons for sleep problems. A common medication used for sleep disorders is melatonin, which can help to establish a healthy sleep rhythm. Make sure you discuss medications with your pediatrician or sleep specialist BEFORE trying them with your child.

At home, having a consistent bedtime ritual and the same sleep and wake-up times every day will go a long way toward helping your child and your family get a good night's sleep. Good sleep hygiene also continues throughout the day. Make sure that your child gets out in the sunlight every day for some exercise, as daytime light can help sleep.

Sally Ward, MD, is division head of Pediatric Pulmonology and director of the Children's Hospital Los Angeles Sleep Laboratory
Iris Perez, MD, is a pediatric pulmonologist and sleep specialist at Children's Hospital Los Angeles

Tips for Good Sleep Hygiene

At bedtime:

- Sleep in a dark, cool and quiet room
- Use a comfortable bed and use it only for sleep
- Dim the lights in the evening and before bedtime
- Maintain a routine
- Limit the use of TV, computers or games before bedtime
- No snacks or drinks
- No vigorous exercise 1 to 2 hours before bedtime
- Limit mentally stimulating activity before bedtime

During the day:

- Limit "catch-up" sleep on weekends to two hours in the morning
- Have your child take age-appropriate naps only
- Allow exposure to sunlight for at least 30 minutes, preferably in the morning
- Exercise regularly
- Use techniques throughout the day to relieve stress and worry
- No caffeine, such as soda or coffee

Research Highlight: Screen Time vs. Sleep Time in Boys With Autism

A recent study suggests a link between the use of TV and video games (called "screen time" in this study) and the amount of sleep time for boys with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The study was conducted by the Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders at the University of Missouri, a member of the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network.

The study looked at screen time and sleep time in boys ages 8-17 with ASD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and compared them to typically developing boys. The results suggest that boys with ASD get more sleep at night when they spend less time with TV and video games during the day.



These findings are of particular importance, given that many children with ASD (50 to 80 percent) have difficulty falling and staying asleep at night.

"Some parents might consider taking out TVs, video games and computers from the bedroom to decrease the urge to watch or play in the middle of the night," says Larry Yin, MD, developmental behavioral pediatrician and medical director of the Boone Fetter Clinic at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. "Another suggestion might be to stop screen time at least an hour before bedtime. However, screen-based media can also have a calming effect on children with ASD, so a thoughtful approach may actually enhance sleep."

Further research is needed to better understand how the use of media affects sleep in children with ASD. Talk to your child's doctor if you have concerns.

Autism and Sleep Toolkit



The toolkit focuses on addressing your child's unique sleep habits. This can mean changes to where the child sleeps, as well as to how parents talk with their children at bedtime and during night waking. The suggestions described in this booklet can aid parents in helping their children develop better sleep patterns. The toolkit also includes some unique tools such as a visual schedule to teach bedtime routines, and a Bedtime Pass to create an incentive to stay in bed and sleep.

The Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network is an excellent resource for parents. For example, the network provides parent toolkits on a wide variety of topics. "The Parent's Guide to Improving Sleep in Children with Autism" provides strategies and suggestions based on both research and the clinical experience of sleep specialists. The strategies are for children of all ages, including teens.

- Try one small change, and then slowly incorporate other changes.
- Be patient and persistent. It can take two weeks or more to see a change.

You can access the toolkit and other great resources by visiting autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits.



When selecting a sleep program, keeping these few ideas in mind will help you achieve success:

- Select ideas that work well with your family's lifestyle.
- Begin to implement the plan when you have the time and energy to see if it works.

Apps to Help With Your Child's Sleep Time

Though "screen time" has recently been linked to sleep problems (see "Research Highlight," page 3); when used thoughtfully, screens may also help. Every child is different, and what works for one child may not work for the next. Following are some apps that have been created to help children and families deal with sleeping difficulties.



Little Star Sleep Time Story

is an iPhone app that allows you to create a bedtime story for your child using your own photos. Each story has the text preloaded to guide you in writing a story to help your child learn what's expected at sleep time. You can change the text as needed and record your voice on each page so it can be read to your child. The app also comes with a tips

section that provides helpful information on encouraging better sleep patterns for your child. The app is great for children 12 and under. However, if screen time at night seems to be connected to sleep problems for your child, this might not be a good option for you.



Sleep Champ, an Android and iPhone app, offers parents a unique, well-researched tool that can identify potential sleep and breathing problems in children and provide helpful resources. Sleep Champ is recommended for all children, but especially those with an increased risk for sleep-related breathing disorders due to problems such as obesity/overweight, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder.



Birdhouse for Autism

is a free iPhone app that helps you organize the most important information about your child. Use Birdhouse to keep a secure record of medications, supplements, therapies and therapists, and to track your child's daily behaviors and activities so you can discover what's working and what needs to be changed. Birdhouse enables parents and caregivers to monitor items like wake and sleep times, which medications and therapies the child receives each day, moods, meltdowns, bodily functions and more. Everything is simple, searchable and easy to find.