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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Tips for Good Sleep Hygiene, page 3
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.

What are common behavioral issues?
Iris Perez, MD: 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?
Sally Ward, MD: 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?
Iris Perez, MD: If you have a child with ASD who has trouble getting a good night’s sleep, there are both behavioral and medical treatments.
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 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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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