


Help for Sleepy Kids

Lindsey Biel, OTR/L

 SINCE COWRITING *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*, I've received hundreds of letters from parents, teachers, therapists, psychologists, and others. Many describe similar concerns: how can I help a child—or myself—feel more comfortable? Learn more effectively? Behave more acceptably? Play more joyfully? In the coming year, I'll share some of the most common questions and my answers.

Dear Sensory Smarts,
My eight-year-old son is an *awful* sleeper. He's all riled up when it's time for bed. He finally falls asleep very late and then it's difficult to wake him up in the morning. We're all exhausted all the time!
From, Sleepy Family

Dear Sleepy Family,
Unfortunately, autism and sleep disturbances seem to go hand in hand. Somewhere between 50 and 80% of people with autism have a sleep problem, whether it's getting to bed early enough, falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up too early.

There are many theories as to why this is so. The brain differences that result in autism may also create sleep problems. For example, unusual biochemistry may result in insufficient melatonin—the hormone secreted by the pineal gland that helps regulate sleep-wake cycles. Further, the overarousal typical of autism makes it hard to self-regulate and reach the calm state needed to drift off to sleep. A child may be anxious about the day's events or feel left out of activities if parents or older siblings are awake. Loud snoring, congested breathing, teeth grinding, and sleep apnea all interfere with sleep quality too.



For kids who struggle with transitions and have a hard time going to bed, start your bedtime routine up to an hour in advance.

Of course, sensory issues can have a huge impact on sleep. An auditory sensitive child may have trouble filtering out sounds, whether it's traffic outside, the TV down the hall, or even the sound of a sibling breathing in the next bed or next room. A tactile defensive child may be disturbed by the pajamas, sheets, pillow, blanket, or the firmness of the mattress. The room may be too warm, too cool, too bright, too dark for your child to relax and sleep. Happily, fairly simple changes can make a big difference!

Establish predictable bedtime routines

Have your child go to bed and wake up at the same time every morning, seven days a week. It's tempting to let kids stay up late and sleep late on weekends and vacations, but this confuses the body's internal time clock and can disrupt sleep well beyond the weekend or holiday.

For kids who struggle with transitions and have a hard time going to bed, start your bedtime routine up to an hour in advance. Develop a sequence for getting ready for bed such as brushing teeth and washing face, talking about the day's

events, reading a book, and then lights out. Build in some variety so your child doesn't get too rigid about bedtime rituals. You may always read a book, but you can read different books throughout the week from the library. It may be very comforting for kids to have a social story about the bedtime routine and, for some, to have a picture schedule for each step.

While we may assume that evening activities should be calm and quiet, some children actually require intense vestibular and proprioceptive input before they can settle in for the night. You may find that your child falls asleep more easily if, for example, he starts his routine by jumping on his mini-trampoline or climbing a few flights of stairs and *then* brushes his teeth and so on.

A bath is often soothing for kids before bed because the water provides deep pressure. If your child does not drink bath water, try adding Epsom salts to the bath since the magnesium helps relax muscles and induce sleep. However, some kids are overstimulated by a bath just before bed. If this is the case, have them bathe earlier.

Many kids and adults self-soothe orally. If your child craves chewing gum, sucks his thumb, bites himself, or puts nonfood objects in his mouth frequently, he may benefit from an oral comfort such as a Chewy Tube, Ark Grabber, Kid Companion, or a Dr. Bloom's chewable jewel. You'll find these and more at sensorysmarts.com in Toys & Equipment/oral comforts.

Make the room, clothing, and bedding comfy

Use a night light if your child prefers one, but consider whether your child needs the room to be completely dark. You may need to install black-out shades or double-pane windows. Minimize environmental noise by keeping the house relatively quiet, using a white noise machine or CD, a fan, or actually soundproofing the room. Make sure the room isn't too hot or too cold. Do what you can do to fix vibrations from an air conditioner or a clanging radiator. Use a humidifier if the air is very dry.

Make sure the mattress is not lumpy, too hard, or too soft. Most kids prefer all-cotton bedding and cotton or polar fleece pajamas with tags and labels removed and without elastic waistbands and cuffs. Speak with your occupational therapist about using a weighted blanket at bedtime.

If your child is smell-sensitive, take out the garbage before bedtime and air out lingering cooking smells. Use unscented laundry

detergent and in general, avoid fabric softener because it leaves a residue.

Other strategies

Eliminate or reduce daytime naps because they often interfere with nighttime sleep.

Avoid having your child associate the bedroom with fun, or playtime activities. Reserve the bed for sleeping only.

Consult with your doctor if your child is taking medicine such as antihistamines and mood stabilizers and his sleeping habits have changed. Avoid products containing caffeine such as chocolate, hot cocoa, ice tea, Coke/Pepsi/Mountain Dew, Midol, Excedrin Migraine up to *six hours* prior to bedtime.

Ask your pediatrician about giving your child melatonin before bed. Research so far shows this dietary supplement to safely help regulate sleep-wake cycles in children with autism.

Finally, use these sleep strategies to help yourself too. A well-rested caregiver is the best person to help a sleepy kid get a good night's sleep!

For more on getting a good night's sleep and other sensory smart tips and strategies, please read *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit sensorysmarts.com's tips section. Got a question? I'd love to hear from you. Please send questions to Lindsey@sensorysmarts.com. ■

