

# Aspect Autism Advisor Program

## Positive Sleep Practices

### Why is sleep important?

Sleep helps us to recover physically from our days. It also helps us store memories which are required for learning. Lack of quality sleep can affect the following:

- Physical wellbeing
- Emotional wellbeing
- Learning
- Behaviour
- Sensory processing abilities

### Strategies

There are many strategies that can be used to help children have a good night sleep. These strategies relate to three main areas - routine, environment, and diet and exercise.



### Routine

- Set regular bedtimes and wake times. Keep sleep consistent between weekdays and weekends.
- Make the hour before bed a time for relaxing.
  - » Engage the child in calming activities 30 minutes before bed.
  - » Have the last 30 minutes of the routine occur in their bed, e.g. read a book, quiet music.
  - » Avoid screen time before bed.
- Have the child go to bed when sleepy, but still awake so they can fall asleep quickly by themselves.
- Avoid too much sleep during the day or naps late in the afternoon.

### Environment

- Have the child fall asleep in the same place they will sleep all night.
- Provide comforting objects like a teddy or blanket.
- Make the room as dark as possible.
- Avoid having loud sounds and bright lights (e.g. TV, computer) while the child is trying to fall asleep.
- Ensure the child will not overheat during the night or that their breathing will not be restricted.

### Diet and exercise

- Engage the child in lots of physical activity and outside play during the day.
- Avoid large meals close to bedtime. A small snack before brushing teeth may assist in settling a child to sleep.
- Avoid foods with caffeine including cola drinks and chocolate 4 - 6 hrs before bedtime.
- Give the child adequate fluids during the day to avoid excess drinking before bedtime. A full bladder and wet nappy is likely to disturb sleep.

## The autism spectrum

Children on the autism spectrum may also benefit from additional support to establish positive sleep practices, such as:

### Sensory strategies

- **Vision:** Avoid bright lights including television and computer screens prior to bedtime. Cover distracting lights such as clocks. Use a lava lamp or a night light for comfort. In the morning, open curtains or blinds, turn on bright lights to signal the beginning of the day.
- **Sound:** Some children find continuous 'white noise' helpful to reduce the sound of outside noises. Others may enjoy quiet music (such as a lullaby or classical music) as part of the bed time routine.
- **Touch and temperature:** If your child finds massage or firm hugs to be calming, you can provide these sensations after their shower or when they are in bed to help them settle to sleep. Consider what textures your child finds calming when choosing pyjamas and bedding. You may find using items such as sheepskins, silk/satin sheets and pillowcases, sleeping bags and soft blankets helps them to settle to sleep. Try to provide a sleeping environment that isn't too warm or too cold for your child.
- **Smell:** You can associate sleep with one particular type of smell such as lavender or another essential oil which may also have a calming effect.
- **Weighted blankets** are something that parents/ carers often ask about to support their child's sleep, however there is currently no evidence-based research to support the use of weighted blankets to improve sleep for children on the autism spectrum, and there are potential risks involved in their use. Any discussion around weighted blankets needs should be done in consultation with an Occupational Therapist who can outline the risks and cautions.

### Behavioural strategies

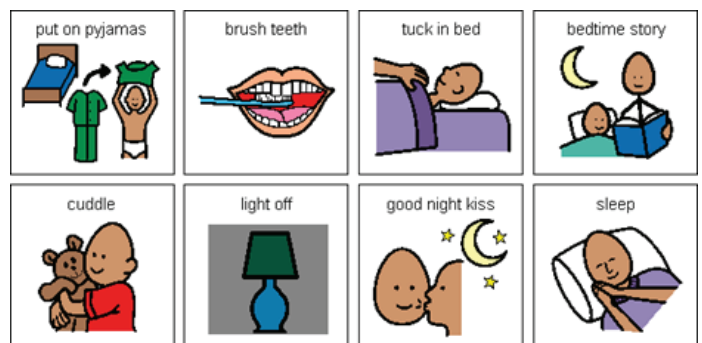
- **Timetable sleep:** Establish a fixed time for going to bed and waking up. Change the bed time (either earlier or later) so that it is a better fit with their natural sleep rhythm and they are not spending a long time awake in their beds before going to sleep.
- **Distancing parents and carers:** If your child needs you to lie or sit with them, or sit with them, while they fall asleep, start to work on gradually distancing yourself from your child

at bedtime so that they learn to go to sleep without you there. Gradually distance yourself from your child by moving from lying on the bed, to sitting next to it and then gradually moving away until you are outside of the child's bedroom. This may take a few nights or even weeks. Use a similar approach if your child is waking up in the night.

- **Positive Reinforcements:** Give praise and/ or rewards such as stickers or stamps during the bedtime routine and upon waking in the morning. Make sure that the reward does not over-excite the child during the bedtime process.

### Communications strategies

- **Language and visuals:** Use consistent language and visual prompts to teach the sequence of the bedtime routine. You can use a visual sequence of photos or drawings to help your child follow the bedtime routine and to reinforce any rewards that you may introduce for sleeping well in their own bed.
- **Social stories:** A social story can be used to teach the child their sleep routine and help them understand where they sleep or what to do if they wake during the night



If your child has more significant sleep difficulties or you have any concerns around their breathing or behaviour during the night, please consult your GP or Paediatrician to discuss whether any medical investigations or a referral to a specialist Sleep Physician would be beneficial. An occupational therapist or psychologist with experience in sleep difficulties can help to develop strategies to support your child's sleep routine.

### References

[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

*Sleepwise: information booklet for parents and carers. Intellectual Services Disability Council, Government of South Australia, 2005.*