

4 TIPS TO ENSURE OPTIMUM SLEEP FOR YOUR CHILD

Do you know how much sleep your child is getting a night? How can you know if they are getting enough? Like millions of parents, you might be asking yourself these questions and wondering how you can improve the quality of your little one's sleep.

According to The Sleep Foundation, a Parental Report revealed that, across all ages, children are lacking approximately two hours of sleep a night. While it may not appear blatant or obvious that your child is missing two whole hours of sleep a night, the signs of sleep deprivation can be easily overlooked or misdiagnosed. Some of the commonly misdiagnosed symptoms of sleep deprivation include struggling to pay attention, difficulty performing well in school, displaying irritability and exhibiting poor-tolerance. These symptoms can be wearisome for children to experience as much as they are for adults to witness. Unfortunately, these same symptoms are often magnified in children who struggle with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Studies have shown that children with ASD and ADHD are at a much higher risk of obtaining poor sleep than children who do not register on the spectrum. The quantity and quality of sleep for children with ASD and ADHD is often directly affected by changes and alterations in their sleeping conditions and routines. Therefore, the goal as a parent should be to establish consistent sleeping routines for your child so that they have the highest chance of getting quality sleep. I've identified four tips for how to combat sleep deprivation and improve sleep.

Sleep Hygiene

You might be wondering: What is sleep hygiene? Essentially, proper sleep hygiene is what ensures that your child gets consistent, quality sleep. One way that you

can start implementing good sleep hygiene is by getting your child ready for bed at the same time each night so that their bodies can adjust and get into the rhythm of a proper sleep cycle. Another way is through establishing a pre-bedtime routine and schedule so that your child can begin to recognize the signs of "bedtime". Most importantly, you should always be consistent with your child's sleep schedule; even during weekends. Consistency will help your child feel secure and that they rest within a tried and true routine. Furthermore, it will also remind them that you are placing their needs first, which will ultimately provide your child with comfort and peace.

Sleep Environment

It's inevitable that children will fall asleep in some of the strangest places and positions. So it may seem unnecessary to make the extra effort to create a tranquil environment for them to sleep in. However, when you create a calming and comfortable environment for your child to sleep in- the quality of their sleep will improve dramatically. The first strategy you can employ to promote a nourishing sleep environment is maintaining a dark, quiet room. Dimly-lit or dark room environments promote deep and uninterrupted sleep. If your child gets nervous sleeping in a completely dark room, you can use a small night-light to help ease their tension. Another way that you can make sure your child is getting the most out of their sleep cycle is by helping them limit the number of times they get up during the night. If your child makes frequent trips to the bathroom during the night, try making sure that they use the bathroom before crawling into bed. Also, avoid providing them with stimulants before bed that would prevent restful sleep like caffeine, chocolate, chocolate milk, ice cream, etc. Even watching TV or playing computer games and video games can make them restless, too. One great way that you can promote relaxation is through reading a book with your child or putting on relaxing music.



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Sleep Independence

Even though it can be wonderful to strengthen the bond between you and your child by allowing them to sleep with you, this sleeping pattern actually creates a crippling co-dependence that will prevent you from establishing a healthy bedtime routine. Encouraging your child to sleep on its own may not be easy, but it's a very healthy practice to implement. Do what you can to stay consistent with your new rules and they will eventually adjust. One way that you can gradually implement this change is by slowly weaning off your physical presence when they fall asleep. By gradually removing yourself from their recipe for night-time relaxation, your child will build more self-confidence. Another way that you can help them feel secure while falling asleep is through providing a "transition object", like a stuffed animal. Transition objects work essentially like training wheels for sleep. Your child will transition from needing your sole support to becoming more self-reliant.

Melatonin

On occasion, using a sleep aid like melatonin is helpful. Melatonin is a hormone produced in the brain that tells our body it is time for sleep. Naturally, melatonin levels begin to rise mid- to late evening when it begins to get dark outside. Light directly affects how much melatonin your body produces and screen time has been proven to affect its production. We also know that children with ASD are prone to having abnormal levels of melatonin in the brain. When used responsibly it can help children fall asleep easier. It is important to follow your pediatrician's guidance on dosing and timing before starting it. Even with melatonin, improving sleep quality is not an easy fix. Remember that melatonin is a sleep aid to a consistent bedtime routine.

If you feel your child is struggling with poor sleep, it is always best to follow up with your pediatrician. Meeting

with your child's doctor will ensure that your child is getting the customized care they need. When your child sleeps better, you'll get more of the optimum sleep that you need to succeed, too.

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