

Sleep Difficulties for Neurodivergent Children

Children can have difficulty sleeping for a variety of reasons, and difficulties can occur more frequently in neurodivergent children. There are many factors that can contribute to sleep difficulties.

Other Conditions

Sometimes another condition or its treatment can impact on sleep including:

- Being unwell, or having another physical illness
- Having a condition that causes hyperactivity or restlessness (such as ADHD)
- Taking medication that has an impact on sleep

If these apply to your child, you should still try to follow this advice to help improve sleep patterns.

Sensory Issues

Neurodivergent children (particularly autistic children) may be more sensitive to noise or light than other children and this can sometimes be a cause of sleep issues. If this is the case, reducing the sensory stimulation in the environment can help to improve sleep. Try to:

- reduce light by using a black out blind or curtain that is well fitted.
- use a draught excluder to prevent light entering from under the door.
- ensure that 'standby lights' on equipment are not visible.
- reduce noise, and check for sounds you would not usually notice such as radiator or central heating noise.
- if possible, give your child their own room so that they are not disturbed by others.
- ensure room is free from clutter, and that clothes and toys are put away.
- minimise the stimulation from room décor by choosing pastel colours, un-patterned fabrics and minimal wall decorations.

Over Stimulation

It is very difficult to fall asleep when your mind is overstimulated. It is important for a child to have some 'calming down' or 'relaxation' time before bedtime. Activities that can over stimulate a child include:

- physical play.
- special interests that make the child 'excited'.
- video games, tablets, phones, TV, DVDs or other electronic devices.
- arguments or fighting with siblings.

To help your child relax before bedtime you could try:

- not allowing stimulating activities (listed above) for 1 hour before bedtime.
- placing electronic equipment out of reach (if your child is struggling to follow the rules).
- encouraging your child to have a bath and warm drink before bed.
- read a book or do a puzzle with your child.

Daytime Activities

Sometimes daytime activities can have an impact on the child’s sleep patterns. If a child does not sleep well at night and is grumpy in the day as a result, it can be tempting to allow them a short nap in the day. However, this can trigger a pattern of daytime sleeping and night waking. Also a lack of physical exercise or activity can lead to a child not being tired at bedtimes. Consuming caffeinated or ‘energy’ drinks during the day can also have a negative impact on sleep at night.

To improve sleep patterns you could try:

- not allowing your child to nap during the day (or reducing the nap time if your child is a toddler).
- increasing physical activity – going for a walk, digging in the garden or bouncing on a trampoline can help.
- not allowing your child to consume drinks containing caffeine such as tea, coffee, cola or ‘energy drinks’.

Regular Sleep Routines

Establishing regular routines (which include a period of reduced stimulation before bed) is very important in establishing good sleeping patterns, and for neurodivergent children this structure can be even more important.

Routines should be consistent and therefore a set pattern of predictable activity before bedtime should be followed. An example of a sleep routine:

7:00	Tidy toys away, switch electronic equipment off
7:10	Bath
7:30	Warm milk
7:40	Brush teeth
7:45	Story
8:00	Bed

Neurodivergent children (particularly autistic children) may have difficulty in predicting and following routines (and coping with changes to routines) and so providing the routine in a visual structure can be helpful.

You can create a visual planner at www.AutismWales.org/en/parents-carers/informationfor-an-autistic-child/childrens-picture-cards/

It can also be useful to include ‘waking up’ as an activity within the planner, to help to reassure the child that this will happen after sleep.

Settling to Sleep and Night waking

Sometimes children wake frequently during the night. This is often at the 'lighter sleep' stage of the sleep cycle. At this stage of sleep, the child will naturally become aroused and will need to 'settle themselves' back to sleep. If your child is unable to 'settle' to sleep without the aid of a comforter (be that a blanket or parents!) when they first go to bed at night, they will be unlikely to be able to 'resettle' themselves during the night. It is therefore important to teach your child to 'settle' themselves to sleep at bedtime. If your child struggles with this, or you find yourself laying with your child to help them get off to sleep you could try:

- setting firm boundaries at bedtime, and removing yourself from the child's room before they fall to sleep.
- not allowing your child into your bed to settle to sleep.
- gradually withdrawing yourself from the 'sleep routine' (move from bed to next to bed, then near door, then outside door).
- helping your child to find a way to settle themselves to sleep such as counting or tensing and relaxing muscles in turn from head to toe.
- using a reward chart to reward the behaviour of 'staying in bed alone'.

Help and Support

Sleep difficulties can be very difficult to overcome, especially when you are tired or feeling stressed yourself. If sleep problems are causing many difficulties, seek the advice and support of a professional.