

## Guide to Better Sleep for Children with Autism

Many children have a hard time sleeping, but those with Autism often struggle more than other kids. Below are many tips to help your child fall asleep and stay asleep.

Common Sleep Disorders	Signs that Lack of Sleep is Affecting a Child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Refusal to go to bed</li> <li>➔ Trouble falling asleep</li> <li>➔ Movement while sleeping</li> <li>➔ Snoring or having trouble breathing</li> <li>➔ Not sleeping enough for their age</li> <li>➔ Waking up during the night</li> <li>➔ Daytime sleepiness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Feeling annoyed or getting easily upset</li> <li>➔ Difficult time talking or using their words</li> <li>➔ Difficult time thinking and making good choices</li> <li>➔ Increase in behaviors like aggression</li> <li>➔ Increased hyperactivity or moving around too much</li> <li>➔ Difficulty learning new skills and poor performance at school</li> <li>➔ Difficulty being a good friend or making friends</li> </ul>

### How to Create Good Bedtime Routines for Your Child

It is best to have a calm and regular bedtime routine to help your children get their best sleep. Helping them to calm down, relax, and get ready for sleep should start at least 30 minutes to one hour before you want them to be asleep.

- ➔ Try to give them their own space that is soft, quiet, dark, and cool.
- ➔ If the house is hot or noisy, try using a ceiling fan to keep the room cool and provide subtle background noise (or use a noise machine/sleep sounds app).
- ➔ Before bed, read to your child, sing bedtime songs, or listen to relaxing music.
- ➔ Turn off all radios, TVs, cell phones, and games at least 2 hours before bedtime.
- ➔ Dress your child in light, soft, and comfortable clothes to sleep.
- ➔ Use a timer to create a “bedtime alarm” so that your child knows when bedtime is starting (5-10 minutes for young children; 30 mins to 1 hour for youth/teens).
- ➔ Try a visual schedule to show your child the tasks they need to complete before going to bed. This could include eating a small snack, taking a bath, brushing teeth, giving hugs, or changing into pajamas.
- ➔ Keep the bedtime routine the same each day of the week, even on weekends.
- ➔ Make sure all family members and caregivers follow the routine for your child.

Additional Information, Tools, and Resources are available:

[CBHPhilly.org](https://www.cbhphilly.org)

[Autism Speaks Sleep Tool Kit](#)

[Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training Collaborative \(ASERT\)](#)

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## Tips for Keeping a Regular Bedtime Schedule

### *Choose a Bedtime...and Keep It*

*For young children, the same bedtime and awake times should be followed all seven days a week. For teens, weekend bedtimes and awake times should be within one hour of their weekday schedule.*

### *Time It Right*

*If your child takes over one hour to fall asleep, move up their bedtime by 30 minutes to an hour the next night, as they are more likely to refuse sleep when overtired.*

### *Adjust Routines as Your Child Ages*

*As your child grows, bedtime should be later, but still allow for enough sleep. Teens will need 8 – 9 hours of sleep per night.*

### *Early to Rise*

*Even if your child goes to bed late, you should wake them within 1 hour of their normal wake-up time. Although it may seem better to let your child ‘sleep in’ and catch up on sleep, a regular wake time will help them sleep better the next night.*

### *Nap Time*

*If your child is under age 5 and has a daytime nap, keep the nap times regular and in the same sleeping place whenever possible. Naps should end by 4 p.m. to make falling asleep at night easier.*

## Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) right for my child?

CBT is a type of therapy that helps children learn about how their thoughts and behaviors could be making it harder for them to sleep. Some examples are worrying too much or thinking about sad or negative thoughts. CBT therapy works well in children who engage in weekly sessions for as little as 12 weeks.

- ➔ CBT has been shown to improve sleep in children with Autism
- ➔ Children may learn how to keep a thoughts diary or sleep diary that they review with their therapist
- ➔ CBT can be either in-person or via telehealth appointments (over a smartphone, mobile device, or computer)

*To connect with a behavioral health provider near you, visit the [CBH Provider Directory](#) or call CBH Member Services at 888-545-2600*

# Guide to Better Sleep for Children with Autism

## Sleep Medication for Children With Autism

Your child’s doctor may also consider medication to improve your child’s sleep. Medications may be recommended if other interventions are not effective. Medications should be used along with the other behavioral suggestions listed in this resource guide.

Be sure to speak with your child’s doctor and make a plan for their individual needs

Medication	Description	Side Effects & Warnings
Melatonin (ages 3+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Available without a prescription (speak to your child’s doctor before starting)</li> <li>➔ A hormone naturally produced in the brain that regulates sleep</li> <li>➔ Can help your child fall asleep faster, sleep for longer, and wake up less often during the night</li> <li>➔ Keep melatonin (and all medication) out of your child’s reach</li> <li>➔ Follow dose recommendations made by your child’s doctor</li> <li>➔ Select a product with the <b>USP Verified Mark</b>, meaning it has been tested to meet quality standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Nausea, headache, dizziness</li> <li>➔ Too much melatonin may make your child’s insomnia worse</li> </ul>
Antihistamines (ages 6+ without a prescription)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Not recommended for daily use, speak to your child’s doctor before starting.</li> <li>➔ The most common antihistamine is diphenhydramine (Benadryl, Zzzquil)</li> <li>➔ Commonly used for allergies, but can help children fall asleep faster and reduce the number of times they wake during the night</li> <li>➔ May be used in children 2 – 6 years old but requires a prescription.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Blurred vision, constipation, dry mouth</li> <li>➔ Can make some children hyperactive, worsening their sleep problems</li> </ul>
Clonidine (ages 4+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ A prescription medication used to treat a variety of conditions</li> <li>➔ May help children with autism fall asleep and wake up less often</li> <li>➔ Follow dose recommendations made by your child’s doctor and don’t stop this medication without speaking to your child’s doctor first</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Dry mouth, irritability, constipation</li> </ul>



*There are other medications that may be recommended if your child also struggles with behavior or has feelings of sadness or depression. Every medication comes with its own possible benefits and risks.*