

Sleep

Top tips to help your child to self-settle

It's bedtime, time to help your child get ready for bed, pop them between the sheets and head downstairs for some grown-up time... Is this what your evening is like? Or is it more likely to involve a running battle, lying in bed next to your little one, about a million stories or multiple excuses? Many children with ASD struggle to get to sleep or, once they've drifted off, don't stay asleep all night. There are several reasons why this might be harder for your child with ASD than for other children:



- Routines – when your child was a baby, or a toddler, it may have seemed alright to rock them to sleep, lie next to them for hours or pat their back at exactly the right pace. You may have assumed they would grow out of it. However, people with ASD thrive on routine; it is what makes them feel secure in a world which is so often unpredictable. This can mean that those routines which worked when they were a baby or toddler may still be needed as they get older.
- Anxiety – by the time they get to bedtime your child has experienced a lot of anxiety build-up during their day. You may find that this is the time that they want to off-load their worries, telling you about all the hard stuff that has happened during the day. Or they may find their mind whizzing as they lie in bed, preventing them from sleeping. Your child probably won't know that this is why they can't sleep or have any idea how to help themselves to drop off.
- Sensory needs – most people with ASD experience differences in the way they experience sensory stimuli. Maybe they're too hot, the traffic outside is too loud, they can hear you talking downstairs or the neighbour having a shower next door. It could be that they feel trapped underneath the duvet or that they can't ignore the street lamp outside the window.

When planning a bedtime routine for your child it is important to remember that whatever you do to help them get to sleep at bedtime will need to be repeated when they wake up in the middle of the night. If they know how to settle themselves to sleep initially, they will be more likely to be able to use these skills to turn over and go back to sleep at 3am. The aim is to help your child to learn to fall asleep alone in his/her bed, without your presence. The below is a starting point to help you think about the best ways to achieve this target for your child.

Working together to make sense of the world

Step 1:



Choose a reasonable bedtime when the child is tired, but not overtired. To do this it can help to work backwards from when you want them to get up, and have some idea of the amount of sleep your child needs. Most primary age children need between 9-10 hours sleep to maximise development for their body and brain*. Some people with autism, however, struggle to achieve anywhere near this much sleep, and may seem to need less. For these people we may need to be more flexible, looking at how much sleep they have at present and starting to teach them to self-settle at a time that works for them. Once this is achieved, you can gradually try to bring bedtime forwards a little at a time (10 or 15 minutes every few weeks) to help your child to extend the amount of time they spend sleeping.

*We have another help sheet which explains the importance of sleep and getting enough of it, and looks at tweaks to behaviour during the day, evening and wind down hour which can help prepare the body for a good night's sleep.

Step 2:



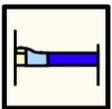
Start a regular relaxing routine about 1 hour before bedtime. Activities during this time should be calming and non-stimulating. The type of activity will be different for each child. Some children may have a special interest which calms them, and this could be the perfect opportunity to give them some time to indulge in it. For others, this would overstimulate them. You may want to think about quiet activities such as jigsaws, books, or building blocks. No screens should be used during this time, as the light from them, and the stimulation the moving imaged and interesting content cause in the brain can stimulate the brain to produce cortisol (which keeps you awake) and inhibit the production and effect of melatonin (which makes you sleepy).

Step 3:



Use visuals to reinforce what is going to happen. We know people with autism process visually, so showing them what is going to happen in this way can be helpful. For some children this will mean the use of symbols, for others photographs will be more meaningful. Older or more able children may prefer a simple written list, while very young children might need you to show them objects associated with each step of the process. If you're not sure what would be best, talk to your child's school about how they communicate upcoming events to them.

Step 4:



bedroom

Go to the night-time rooms (bedroom and bathroom) and don't go back downstairs. It is easier to make this distinction between daytime and night time areas if you live in a house with an upstairs. However even if your home is all on one level you can have a clear distinction at this time. Once your child has made the transition towards bed, the lounge, playroom etc are off limits.

Step 5:



Have a relaxing bath that could last up to 15-20 minutes. The aim of the bath is for an unwinding routine, so avoid boisterous bath-time games. You could play calming music in the bathroom, add lavender oil to the water or read a story while your child has a bath. The feeling of showers on the skin can be very stimulating, so avoid these close to bedtime. If your child hates baths, and they lead to screaming fits, try to give them earlier in the day, rather than at bed time.

Step 6: Take time to rub and cuddle the child with a towel and put on pyjamas. Make this process calm and relaxing.

Step 7: Take the child to the bedroom and read a story or put on a story tape. Settle them in their bed and spend some quiet calming time together. Maybe make the last story that you read the same one each night, as an additional cue that it is now sleep time.



Step 8: Once the routine is complete, say goodnight.

Your goal is now to distance yourself gradually from the child's room in a series of steps. This could take days or weeks according to the circumstances of each family.

Step 9: The child will eventually learn the new bedtime rules. You can begin by sitting on a chair at the side of the bed. If necessary place a hand on your child for reassurance, but do not pat or rub them, as this would become part of the routine that would then need breaking again.



Step 10: Reduce your contact until you are able to sit next to the bed without touching your child.

Step 11: Gradually move the chair away, e.g. to the end of the bed, by the door, outside the door etc. This process will take time, so be prepared to spread it over days or even weeks



Step 12: Be boring. Your role at this time is to reassure your child and help them to learn to go to sleep. Do not make eye contact. Don't engage in conversation. Simply redirect your child back to the bed, move them that way if necessary, place them back in bed and return to your chair. They should gain nothing from getting out of bed, gradually learning that this is not the time for interactions.

Step 13: Wake your child at the same time each day. While you may like the idea of a lie in for yourself (and your child!) at the weekend or in the holidays, this would put the hard-won sleep routine at risk. Instead, put them to bed and wake them up at the same time every day in order to preserve the pattern which you have developed.



It is normal for children to demonstrate their upset at this change of routines. Their anxiety around the changes may lead to challenging behaviour, or other children may use challenging behaviours intentionally to try to persuade you to revert to the way things used to be. This is simply an expression of the fact that they don't want their routine to change; they don't yet understand the benefits of being able to settle to sleep more easily by themselves. During this period it is important that you, as the parent, are kind but firm and consistent. It is worth considering whether this is the right time for you to start this process.

- Do you have the capacity to maintain a loving but firm and consistent approach at the moment?
- If you have a choice, consider which parent is best placed to provide this calm and consistent approach.
- Is there a calmer period such as a school holiday coming up which would be a good time to work on sleep?
- Is there an event (e.g. Christmas) approaching which is likely to disrupt sleep patterns again? Could you wait until after this?
- Is it possible for siblings to stay at a relative's house for a few nights to enable you to concentrate on settling the child who is having difficulty sleeping?
- What other complications may you have in your situation? Can you problem solve them before starting the process?

Good sleep patterns will help your child and the whole family, and it will be worth some effort to get there.

Written in May 2020. The above advice is based on training from Sleep Scotland and our experiences at Freemantles of working with children who have autism and related difficulties