Supporting Children at Home

Agenda

Sleep
Self-Regulation and calming
Toileting
Play and Schemas
Masking

Topic one

Sleep

40-80% of children and adults with Autism have sleep problems

Good Sleep Hygiene

- Good Sleep Routines (no screen time, predicable routines, set the mood, consistency)
- Bedroom Environment
- Relaxation
- Diet

Sleep Routine

Here are some helpful tips to create a good routine:

Take some time to plan your routine and write it down. Work out what time it will start and ideally this should be an hour before your child goes to sleep. Display the new routine where everybody in the home can follow it eg. stick it on the fridge or on a bedroom door.

Do the same thing at the same time each day, including having a set wake up time each morning. We know this is difficult at the weekend, but it is important to have these set times to support your child's body clock.

Turn off all screens at the start of the routine. They may suppress the body's production of melatonin, the sleep hormone, and make it more difficult to nod off.

Consider whether having a light supper time snack in the routine would be helpful – we have an advice sheet all about sleepy food.

Dim the lights in the hour before bed to encourage the production of melatonin, this will help to promote that sleepy feeling.

Younger children may enjoy a bedtime box, filled with a selection of activities to carry out during the routine. Hand eye co-ordination activities such as jigsaws, colouring and threading.

A bath 30 minutes before bed can help to promote sleep, the decrease in body temperature after a bath can help us to nod off more easily.

Once in bed sharing a story is a great way to end the day or older children may prefer to read independently.

Sample routine

- **7.00pm**
- Dim lights, turn off all screen activity
- **7.05pm**
- Calming activity using child's interest. Hand eye co-ordination activities are good. Colouring/drawing/cutting and sticking/jigsaws/bricks
- **7.15pm**
- Supper time with sleepy foods
- **7.30pm**
- Upstairs for bath time (if this is appropriate) alternatively massage/mindfulness activities. Pyjama's on from radiator if no bath.
- **8.00pm**
- Hugs and Kisses (Keep these to the same length each night) say it's sleep time.

If child gets up follow steps for either gradual retreat/rapid return depending on strategy being used.
Stay calm.
No eye contact and no conversation.
Only use set phrase (It's sleep time).

Bedroom Environment

Decorate in neutral colours, bright colours can be over stimulating.

If the room is too hot or too cold it can disturb sleep, around 18 degrees is ideal, you may find it helpful to invest in a room thermometer.

Make the bedroom a gadget free zone. If possible, keep TVs, gaming devices, tablets and phones out of the bedroom. Using them before may suppress the production of melatonin, the sleep hormone, and make it more difficult to nod off.

White noise can mask out background noise and may be useful.

For younger children put away toys or cover them with sheets at nighttime so that they don't provide a distraction. For older children try to discourage them from doing schoolwork on their bed and pack away school books at bedtime.

Bedroom Environment

A dark environment can help with melatonin production making us feel drowsy at the start of the night. Blackout blinds can also help in the summer months to avoid early waking.

Some youngsters (and adults!) prefer a little light in the room at nighttime. If a dark room is distressing or disorientating, try using a soft glowing night light that can be safely left on all night. Those with visual/hearing impairments for example can find total darkness disorientating.

Consistent conditions throughout the night are important. Avoid using products that switch off during the night or turning landing lights off when you go to bed.

Comfort is important, we all have different needs when it comes to what we prefer and what suits our bodies. The firmness of the mattress and pillows, the texture of the bedding and nightclothes are all important considerations when planning our sleep environments, especially for those youngsters with sensory needs. For more information on mattresses for children visit NBF's Bed Advice UK.

Never use the bedroom or an early bedtime as a sanction for children, sleep should be promoted positively.

Diet and Sleep

Below is a list of foods that may aid sleep, there still needs to be much more research in this area but many families share that they find this list helpful:

Almonds contain magnesium promotes both sleep and muscle relaxation. They also help to keep blood sugar levels stable overnight.

Bananas are an excellent source of magnesium and potassium. They also contain tryptophan an amino acid that helps us to sleep but don't forget fruit contains sugar too. Blend one banana with one cup of milk or soya milk to make an ideal bedtime drink.

Dairy, yogurt, milk and cheese contain tryptophan helping us to nod off more easily. Calcium is effective in stress reduction and it's not true . . cheese doesn't give you nightmares!

Cherries particularly tart cherries have been found in one small study to naturally boost melatonin production. You could try drinking a glass of cherry juice (available at most natural foods stores) or a serving of fresh, frozen or dried cherries before bedtime.

Cereal not only is it a healthy snack, but it may also help you snooze. Complex carbohydrate-rich foods increase the availability of tryptophan in the bloodstream. Avoid sugar-coated cereals though, these will give your child a sugar rush and wake them up.

Melatonin

What it is?

Prescription

Administering it

What is it?

- Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone that is produced by the brain and it plays an important role in supporting the body's circadian rhythm and promoting restful sleep.
- Levels of melatonin rise at night time making you feel sleepy and drop at dawn causing you to wake, which is why it is sometimes called 'the hormone of darkness'.
- The best way of ensuring optimal melatonin production is for your child to sleep in as dark an environment as possible. Use heavy lined curtains and/or blackout blinds to block out external light.
- In the run up to bedtime, dim the lights and avoid screen time. Melatonin production is interfered with by screen activities for example watching television or playing on a computer. The light from the screens will stop the melatonin being produced as effectively therefore it is best to avoid these activities in the hour leading up to bedtime.

Prescription

- Melatonin can be prescribed and is sometimes used in the management of sleep issues in children. Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities are more at risk of having sleep issues and more commonly prescribed the drug.

- Side effects:
  - Melatonin is usually well tolerated by youngsters, the most common side effects reported are:
  - Headaches
  - Drowsiness
  - nausea
  - dizziness.
  - More rarely it can increase heart rate and may possibly increase seizures in children with epilepsy.

Administering it?

- Until recently only one licensed preparation was available in the UK (Circadin), the license however does not cover use in patients under 55 years of age. Slenyto is a relatively new drug that is licensed for the treatment of insomnia in children and adolescents age 2-18 with Autism Spectrum Disorder and/or Smith-Magenis Syndrome.
- The prescriber will work out the correct dose that a child needs and the time that it should be administered. It will probably be recommended that they begin on a low dose which may be increased if necessary. Your child should begin to feel sleepy 30 minutes to an hour after taking their medication.

Topic Two

Regulation and Calming Strategies

Deep Pressure

Reason – when we feel stressed/overwhelmed out body can go into fight or flight in response to the stimuli.

Deep pressure uses proprioceptive input to create a sense of security.

Once the body feels secure and safe, hormones are released to make us feel safe again.

When to use:
- during a difficult or stressful situation
- to relax your body after a long day at school or out and about
- before we need to stay focused for a period of time

Mindfulness

- Breathing techniques – blowing up a balloon, smelling the flowers, blowing out the candles
- Colouring or drawing
- Counting forwards and backwards
- Going for a walk
- Having a drink or a rest

Teach children to identify what they need to help regulate and calm down so they can use this at times of crisis.

Favourite Toys and games

- Use games to help calm children down when you can see they are becoming dysregulated
- Play or engage with favourite toys
- Sensory toys or messy play
- Outdoor play or garden time

Structured Walks

- Children who need to walk around but find it hard with no purpose – create a structured walk
- Around a small area - place pictures, symbols or objects
- Children have matching objects
- Match or post them on their structured walk
- When they are all gone, they know the walk has come to an end
- Gives the walk meaning!
- Something for the child to concentrate on

Topic Three

Toileting

Eric Website

- Home - ERIC

Topic Four

Play and Schemas

Topic Five

Masking

Masking - What is it?

- Masking - saying you're okay when you're not, to avoid attention and blend in
- Camouflaging - acting like other people to fit in and to avoid being spotlighted. For example, a person who seems sociable might just be wearing their “sociable mask”
- People pleasing - doing things to make others happy even if you don't want to

Signs

- Often quiet
- high personal standards
- reluctant to ask for or access support because they don't want to appear different
- feel a need to be very near friends (their "anchors")

"Masking is when I wear a metaphorical mask that gives me the appearance of being neurotypical"

"Long term masking can lead to shut down, withdrawal and eventually complete burnout"

Why?

- Not all neurodivergent people consciously mask.
- If your natural way of being is widely viewed as "wrong" you may mask in order to appear like everyone else.
- For example, if you have been told to look at someone when you talk to them, you may do this even when it's very uncomfortable for you
- 94% of autistic adults say that they mask (NAS, 2022)

"Masking is a survival instinct and it's absolutely exhausting"

"I find it hard to distinguish between me and my mask if I've been wearing it for a while"

Support at home

- Don't spotlight - make them feel the centre of attention
- Offer feedback very sensitively and support discreetly
- Make sensory adjustments in a covert way
- Respect different communication styles, e.g talking without looking
- Celebrate their successes - however small, but do so quietly
- Value and incorporate special interests
- Offer non-direct way to express anxieties: drawing, log-books, walk- and-talk, emails Talk about your own triggers, responses and ways to regulate - make it okay to not be okay
- Find out anxiety triggers (sensory and non-sensory) and reduce or remove
- Create a welcoming environment

Thank you

Any Questions?