

Improving Sleep for Special Needs Children

Children with special needs often experience sleep difficulties. Down syndrome, autism, ADHD and other conditions are associated with a higher risk of certain sleep disorders. Some medications prescribed for special needs conditions can hinder quality sleep. Sleep difficulties commonly lead to persistent fatigue, excessive daytime sleepiness, diminished concentration and performance and can worsen existing symptoms.

Sleep uniquely impacts different disorders. For example, children with Down syndrome are prone to sleep apnea, insomnia, bedwetting, sleep bruxism and rhythmic movement disorder. Autistic children are more prone to nightmares and night terrors. Children with ADHD are prone to restless

legs syndrome and delayed sleep phase disorders.

Despite the differences, when children do not get enough quality sleep, they struggle with difficulty concentrating which impaired performance and may contribute to behavioral issues.

Serious sleep disorders should be evaluated and treated by a professional medical sleep specialist, such as Dr. Shilpa Pandey at Sleep Medicine & Pediatric Pulmonary Specialists, www.smappsfl.com. Additional symptoms can be managed through sleep therapy or by establishing regular bedtime routines and relaxation strategies that train a child's brain to associate the bed with sleep, not with engaging in activities such as playing, reading or screentime.

Some physicians recommend prescription medications such as sedative-hypnotic z-drugs to

treat sleep disorders. However, these medications can have side effects, carry high dependency risks, and can exacerbate difficult symptoms. Sleep medication is typically considered a last resort. Light therapy can help with delayed sleep phase syndrome by resynchronizing the circadian cycle. Sleep sprays can be used to produce calming effects, www.happysleepspray.com.

Sleep restriction, which sets a strict schedule for bed and wake times with no naps, can be beneficial. Sleep restriction can train a child's body to associate this scheduled period of rest time with sleep.

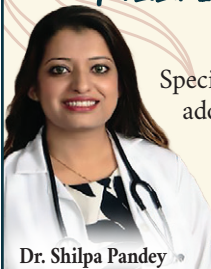
Establishing Successful Sleep Habits

Sleep generally can be improved with better sleep habits. Improving sleep habits should be the first step to address sleep difficulties for children with special needs.

- **Maintain a regular bedtime routine.** Have children go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time each morning, even on weekends and vacation. Go through the same steps before bed each night, such as brushing teeth, reading a book and giving a hug before turning off the light. Keeping the same routine night after night will help train your child's brain to trigger feelings

of sleepiness.

- **Create a sleepy bedroom environment.** A child's bedroom should be relaxing and an ideal environment for sleeping. It should be quiet, dark and cool. An appropriate mattress, and soft, skin-friendly sleepwear can enhance success in a sleep setting. Low profile beds, bed rails, weighted blankets and simple bedding are helpful for sensory sensitivities. There are several companies specializing in sleep setting/systems. See article on page 25 for more about sleep systems.
- **Avoid food that can interfere with sleep.** Heavy meals, sugar, and caffeine can keep children up at night and decrease the quality of sleep. These items should be avoided, especially in the hours right before bed.
- **Limit screen time.** The light from screens can confuse your child's brain and make it think it's daytime. Do not allow children to use screens in bed and cut off screen time at least one hour before bedtime.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** Create a calming environment using consistent routines such as listening to soft music, practicing meditation and using slowed breathing techniques. 🧩



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