

Disability Services: Child and Youth

Children and Adolescents with Sleep Disturbance and Developmental Disabilities

Sleep is a natural but complex process. Many children and adolescents, especially with developmental disabilities, have disturbed sleep that affects their daytime behaviour, learning and health. A child's inadequate sleep can have a large impact on the whole family.



Sleep disturbance is common

Many typically developing children experience sleep disturbance at some stage. This can range from minor, temporary problems to serious sleep disorders such as sleep-related breathing difficulties (apnoea).

Sleep disturbance is common in over 80 per cent of children and adolescents with developmental disabilities. Children with certain diagnoses tend to have different types of sleep disturbances. For example, children with Autism Spectrum Disorders may have trouble getting to sleep and staying asleep, while children with Down syndrome may have breathing-related sleep disturbance.

Sleep disturbance can be long-term

For some children, sleep improves with age. Others continue to experience sleep disturbance into their school years. Children with long-term sleep disturbance can benefit from support and intervention to help them develop better sleeping patterns.

Sleep disturbance in children affects the whole family

Families may find that disturbed nights lead to emotional and physical stress. Parents and carers may become exhausted. Siblings' sleep can also be disrupted, which may affect their moods, behaviour and learning.



Everyone needs to get enough sleep

Everyone is different and the amount of sleep needed (including day naps) is not fixed. But people generally need the following amounts of sleep to be healthy and happy:

- Newborn 16 to 18 hours
- Young child..... 12 to 14 hours
- Child 10 to 12 hours
- Adolescent..... 8 to 10 hours
- Young adult 7.5 to 8.5 hours

The effects of not getting enough sleep

When a person is not sleeping adequately, many areas of life are affected such as:

- Emotional wellbeing (for example, may lead to increased irritability)
- Learning (for example, poor attention and concentration)
- Behaviour (for example, sleepiness or hyperactivity during the day)
- Sensory processing (for example, increased sensitivity to noise)
- Physical coordination (for example, slower reaction time).

Children and adolescents with developmental disabilities are more likely to show the following behaviours if their sleep is disturbed:

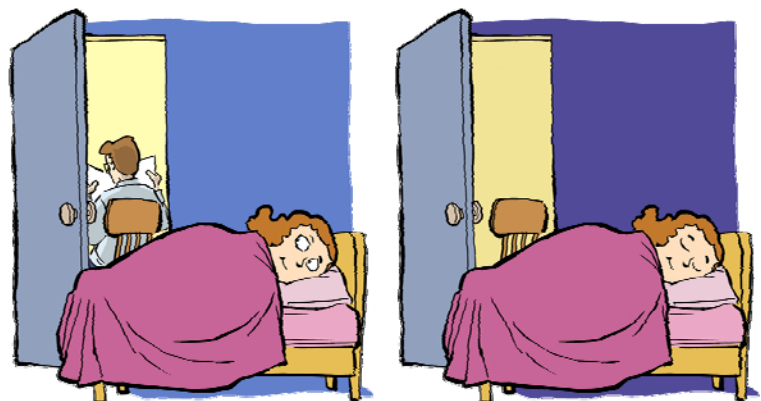
- hyperactivity
- mood swings
- lethargy
- aggression
- self-injurious behaviour.

Intervention can help

Some parents may think that their child's sleep disturbance is related to their diagnosis and that successful intervention is not possible. However, research has shown that we can reduce sleep disturbance in children and adolescents with developmental disabilities. There are things we can do to help.

We can support children and adolescents to settle to sleep and wake less often during the night using a mix of strategies that include:

- Communication
- Sensory
- Behavioural.



Parents and carers can help by teaching their child when and where to sleep. Consistent use of strategies is likely to improve the child's sleep, to the benefit of both the child and family members.

Medical intervention may be required for specific problems such as:

- certain sleep-related breathing difficulties
- certain movement difficulties
- pain
- constipation
- reflux
- epilepsy
- severe anxiety.



Developing positive sleep habits

- Set a regular time for bed each night and wake up time each morning. Keep the time the same on weekdays and weekends.
- Daytime naps need to be geared to the child's age and development. Very long naps, extra naps or naps in the late afternoon can result in sleeping difficulties at night.
- Exercise and spending time outside during the day can help children sleep.
- Avoid large meals close to bedtime. A small healthy snack before teeth cleaning may help the child settle to sleep. Avoid foods with caffeine (such as chocolate) for at least 4 to 6 hours before bedtime. Reduce, or eliminate, overnight eating or drinking.
- Keep the hour before bedtime relaxing. Too much exciting activity can keep a child awake (over aroused).
- Establish a predictable and consistent bedtime routine of around 30 minutes. This should include calm activities such as quiet play or a bath. The last part of the routine should happen when the child is in bed, such as reading stories.
- Restrict TV viewing and use of technology in bedrooms.
- Provide a comfortable bed 'nest', that is warm-to-cool in temperature and has a reduced noise level. Make the bedroom as dark as possible. Use a night light if needed.
- Aim for the child to fall asleep by themselves in the same place in which they will sleep all night.

- Open the curtains in the morning to signal it's time to wake up.
- Be consistent – make sure parents and carers all use the same routines and teach the same positive sleep habits.



The “Sleepwise” Approach

The “Sleepwise” program has been developed to address sleep disturbance in children and adolescents with developmental disabilities.

Parents and carers attend educational workshops discussing typical sleep, positive sleep practices, sleep disturbance and strategies to reduce sleep disturbance. By recording their child’s sleep pattern in a sleep diary and completing a sleep history assessment, possible types of sleep disturbance can be identified. Children with breathing-related sleep problems, epilepsy, pain or severe anxiety will require referral to a medical professional.

Other types of sleep disturbances may be reduced by using a sleep plan, unique to each child, based on a combination of communication, sensory and behavioural strategies.

Professional support is provided over several months from Disability Services: Child and Youth Service because a child’s sleep pattern can be slow to change and sleep plans may need to be modified. In the long term, promoting positive sleep practices can improve a child’s sleep pattern to the benefit of both the child and the family.

Getting more information and assistance

You can get more information on our Child and Youth programs or talk to us about booking for “Sleepwise” workshops by:

- contacting your local disability office
- calling Disability Information and Referrals on 1300 786 117
- emailing disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au

Resources on sleep

Goodnights – a manual for parents/carers who have a child with autism experiencing difficulties with sleep. This is an easy-to-read manual outlining communication, sensory and behavioural strategies when compiling a sleep intervention plan. You can buy the manual at <http://www.autism.org.au> [Autism Association of Western Australia]

Why does sleep matter? General reference information on sleep: <http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au> [Sleep Health Foundation]