



# Play & Grow

HELPING YOUR CHILD  
SLEEP BETTER





# Helping Your Child Sleep Better: A Guide for Parents

This guide is designed to support you in helping your little one build healthy sleep habits. Sleep challenges are common in young children—especially those who may show signs of developmental differences like Autism or ADHD—and they can feel overwhelming for the whole family. The tips you'll find here are based on research and the experience of sleep experts. They're practical strategies you can try at home, even if you're still exploring your child's needs and haven't pursued a formal diagnosis.

## What You'll Find Inside:

- How to create a comfortable sleep environment
- Your guide on pajamas
- Steps to establish a calming bedtime routine
- Visual supports to help
- Ideas for promoting healthy daytime habits

Improving sleep often means making small changes to your child's bedtime routine and sleep setting. It can also involve how you respond during night wakings. Common sleep challenges include trouble falling asleep, waking during the night, or waking too early. If you notice symptoms like snoring, gasping for breath, or frequent bedwetting, it's important to talk with a sleep specialist.

You don't have to change everything at once. Choose ideas that fit your family's lifestyle, start with one small step, and add more over time. Be patient—new habits can take a couple of weeks to show results. With consistency and care, these strategies can help your child sleep better and bring more peace to your home.

If you have any questions, the Autism Society Inland Empire is here to help. We have Resource Specialists who can be reached by email at [info@ieautism.org](mailto:info@ieautism.org) or by calling us at 951.220.6922.

We hope it brings joy, growth, and understanding to your family, helping your child thrive.

# Common Sleep Challenges



Sleep is one of the most essential building blocks for your child's growth and development. In these early years, their brains are making millions of new connections every day, and good sleep helps strengthen learning, memory, and emotional balance. It also supports physical growth and helps stabilize moods. When children don't get enough rest, it can affect attention, behavior, and overall health. Creating healthy sleep habits now can make a big difference for your child's well-being.

For children with Autism, sleep challenges are very common. Research shows that 50–80% of children on the spectrum struggle with sleep, much higher than the 20–30% seen in other children. Some studies report that up to 83% experience sleep disturbances, and many parents share ongoing struggles like difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep.

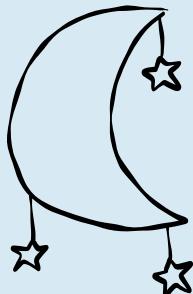
Improving sleep doesn't just help your child—it helps the whole family. Better sleep can reduce stress, improve daily routines, and support a healthier, happier home. This guide offers practical tips to help you take proactive steps toward better sleep for your child.



## Encouraging behaviors that promote sleep

Regular physical activity during the day helps children fall asleep more easily and enjoy deeper, more restful sleep. If your child does not get enough exercise at school, try to schedule active play at home, such as outdoor games or a walk. Make sure vigorous activity ends at least two to three hours before bedtime, as stimulating exercise too close to bedtime can make it harder to settle down.

Avoid caffeinated foods and drinks, such as chocolate, soda, tea, and coffee, especially in the afternoon and evening. Caffeine can stay in the body for 3 to 12 hours and may cause alertness that interferes with sleep. Some children sleep best when caffeine is completely removed from their diet, while others do well as long as it's avoided several hours before bedtime.



You don't have to change everything at once. Pick one idea that fits your family's lifestyle, try it consistently, and add more over time. Be patient —new habits can take a couple of weeks to show results. With consistency and care, these strategies can help your child sleep better and bring more peace to your home.

# Creating a Calming Environment

A calm, cozy space can make a big difference. Remember, children with Autism often experience sensory input differently, so they may not feel the environment the same way you do. Experiment gently to find what works best for your child's unique sensory needs.

**Choose a Quiet, Low-Stimulation Location.** Pick a room or corner away from household noise and bright lights. Use blackout curtains or dimmable lamps to control light levels. Keep walls in soft, neutral tones to avoid overstimulation. Too many toys or decorations can be distracting. Arrange the bed and items consistently so the child knows what to expect.

## Create a Predictable Sensory Environment.

- Lighting: soft, warm light or a small nightlight if needed.
- Sound: white noise machine, gentle lullabies, or nature sounds to mask sudden noises. You can also try brown noise or pink noise—these have different tones and may feel more calming for some children.
- Touch: smooth, soft sheets; consider a weighted blanket (only if age-appropriate and approved by an occupational therapist).

**Add Familiar & Soothing Elements.** A favorite stuffed animal or comfort object (safe for age). A small sensory-friendly item, like a soft, textured pillow or plush. Gentle scents like lavender (only if the child enjoys it and it's safe).





# Sleepwear That Helps Your Child Feel Calm and Cozy

Children on the autism spectrum often need a little extra thought when it comes to pajamas because many have sensory differences that make certain fabrics or fits feel uncomfortable. Things like tags, seams, or tight elastic can bother them, and some kids get warm or cold more easily, so soft, breathable materials like cotton, bamboo, or modal can make a big difference. Pajamas with flat seams, no tags, and adjustable waistbands or cuffs help reduce irritation and make the fit more comfortable. Easy-on, easy-off designs—such as zippers, snaps, or stretchy necklines—can also make bedtime smoother for kids who struggle with dressing or prefer quick changes.

Since sleep can already be challenging for many autistic children, pajamas that feel gentle, predictable, and cozy can help them settle more easily. Some kids even find snug-fitting pajamas calming because of the gentle pressure, though it's best to introduce these slowly and check with an occupational therapist if you're unsure. Overall, choosing comfortable, familiar sleepwear can support your child's sensory needs and help create a peaceful bedtime routine.

## Sensory-Friendly Clothing Brands



- Kozie Clothes – sensory-smart pajamas and adaptive clothing - [kozieclothes.com](http://kozieclothes.com)
- SmartKnit Kids – seamless, tag-free pajamas and undergarments- [smartknitkids.com](http://smartknitkids.com)
- Cloud Nine Clothing – soft, calming sensory-friendly sleepwear - [cloudnineclothing.com](http://cloudnineclothing.com)
- Hanna Andersson – organic, tag-free pajamas with soft seams - [hannaandersson.com](http://hannaandersson.com)
- Primary – simple, soft, tagless basics - [primary.com](http://primary.com)
- Amazon – sensory-friendly clothing section - [www.amazon.com/s?k=sensory+friendly+clothing](http://www.amazon.com/s?k=sensory+friendly+clothing)
- Target Adaptive Clothing Line – [www.target.com/c/adaptive-clothing/-/N-4yn40](http://www.target.com/c/adaptive-clothing/-/N-4yn40)
- Zappos Adaptive – [zappos.com/e/adaptive](http://zappos.com/e/adaptive)

# Establishing a Bedtime Routine

**Consistency is key.** Choose a few relaxing activities, such as reading a favorite book, taking a warm bath, or gentle stretching. Follow the same steps each night so your child knows what to expect. This predictability helps reduce anxiety and signals that it's time to wind down.

- Short, predictable routines help children anticipate what's coming next, reducing anxiety and promoting relaxation.
- Help your child wind down before bedtime. Determine which activities are calming or stimulating for your child. Calming events should be part of the bedtime routine. Stimulating events should be moved earlier in the evening. For example, if your child finds bathing stimulating, reschedule it to an earlier time in the evening. Turn off screens at least an hour before bedtime. Avoid loud music or exciting games for 30 minutes before sleep. Instead, encourage quiet, calming activities.
- Soothing activities (such as reading a calming story, listening to gentle music, or dimming the lights) signal to the brain that it's time to wind down.
- Timing matters: Starting the routine 15–30 minutes before bedtime is ideal, and keeping it under 60 minutes prevents overstimulation.
- Consistency and visual supports: Doing the steps in the same order each night and using visual schedules or objects can be very helpful for children with Autism, who often thrive on structure and predictability.



# Predictable bedtime routine

Here's an example of a bedtime routine for a young child with Autism that is short, predictable, and calming.

## Sample Bedtime Routine (30-45 minutes)

Start Time: 7:15 PM

Bedtime: 8:00 PM

### Step 1: Alert & Transition (7:15 PM)

- Give a 10-minute warning: "In 10 minutes, we'll start our bedtime routine."
- Use a visual timer or picture card showing "Play → Bedtime."

### Step 2: Bath or Wash Up (7:25 PM)

- A warm bath or a quick wash to signal wind-down.
- Please keep the lights soft and the water temperature comfortable.

### Step 3: Brush Teeth (7:35 PM)

- Use a favorite toothbrush or flavored toothpaste for comfort.
- Praise after brushing: "Great job cleaning your teeth!"

### Step 4: Pajamas (7:40 PM)

- Choose soft, tag-free pajamas for sensory comfort.
- Offer a choice: "Do you want the blue pajamas or the green ones?"

### Step 5: Quiet Activity (7:45 PM)

- Read a calming story (e.g., Goodnight Moon or Guess How Much I Love You).
- Dim the lights and speak softly.

### Step 6: Lights Down & Goodnight (8:00 PM)

- Turn off bright lights, use a night-light if needed.
- Say the exact goodnight phrase each night: "Sweet dreams, see you in the morning."

# Making transitions smoother

Children with Autism often need extra time to transition between activities. Giving a gentle warning before bedtime helps them feel prepared and reduces stress.

## Sample Phrases

- "In 10 minutes, it will be time to start our bedtime routine."
- "Five more minutes to play, then we'll get ready for bed."
- "After this puzzle, we'll brush teeth and read a story."
- "Bedtime is coming soon. What would you like to do before we start?"

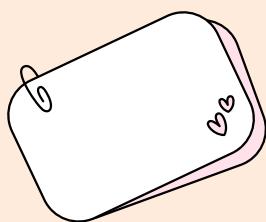
## Visual Schedule/Timer Ideas

- Countdown Timer App: Use a simple app with a big visual clock.
- Sand Timer: A 5-minute or 10-minute hourglass is excellent for younger kids.
- Color Timer: A timer that changes color as time runs out (green → yellow → red).
- Picture Schedule: Show a card with "Play" and then "Bedtime" to show what's next.

## Extra Tips

- Always use the same phrase and tone each night for predictability.
- Pair the alert with a visual cue (timer or picture).
- Give positive choices: "Do you want to finish your book or play with blocks for 5 more minutes?"





# Visual Supports

Visual supports can make bedtime easier for young children by helping create a predictable routine. A simple chart or picture schedule showing steps like bath, pajamas, story, and sleep gives children a clear idea of what happens next, helping them feel safe and reducing stress.

Since toddlers and preschoolers are still developing language skills, visuals provide instructions they can understand without relying on words. They also encourage independence—kids can check the chart themselves instead of needing constant reminders. For children with Autism, ADHD, or sensory sensitivities, visual supports add structure and can make transitions smoother. Adding fun elements, such as stickers or colorful icons, can turn bedtime into a positive experience and motivate cooperation.

We have provided some examples and resources, but if you are working with a special education teacher or ABA company, they can help personalize a schedule for your child.

Here are some visual support resources:

## Free Resource

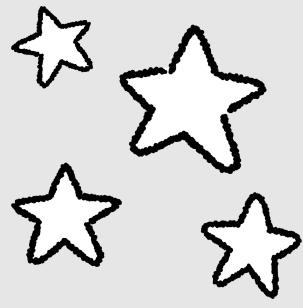
- [socialworkerstoolbox.com/wp-content/uploads/Bedtime-evening-routine-chart-free-editable.pdf](http://socialworkerstoolbox.com/wp-content/uploads/Bedtime-evening-routine-chart-free-editable.pdf)

## Paid Resources

- Amazon: [Slider 3-in-1 Bedtime/Morning/Daily Routine Chart for Kids, Magnetic Chore Chart for Kids, Visual Schedule for Kids, Toddler Schedule Board for Home](#)
- Etsy: [Editable Daily Routine Cards, Toddler Routine Chart, Daily Rhythm, Visual Schedule for Kids, Chore Chart, Printable DIGITAL DOWNLOAD.](#)



# Visual Supports

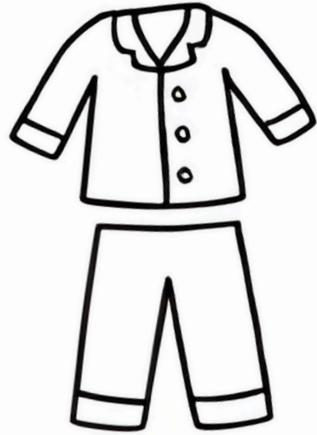


## Visual Bedtime Schedule (High-Contrast Icons)

Start Time: 7:15 PM / Bedtime: 8:00 PM

| Picture | Time    | Step                            | Details  |
|---------|---------|---------------------------------|--|
|         | 7:15 PM | Step 1: Alert & Transition      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Give a 10-minute warning: "In 10 minutes, we'll start our bedtime routine."</li><li>Use a visual timer or picture card showing "Play → Bedtime."</li></ul> |
|         | 7:25 PM | Step 2: Bath or Wash Up         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Warm bath or quick wash to signal wind-down.</li><li>Keep lights soft and water temperature comfortable.</li></ul>   |
|         | 7:35 PM | Step 3: Brush Teeth             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Use a favorite toothbrush or flavored toothpaste for comfort.</li><li>Praise after brushing: "Great job cleaning your teeth!"</li></ul>                    |
|         | 7:40 PM | Step 4: Pajamas                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Choose soft, tag-free pajamas for sensory comfort.</li><li>Offer a choice: "Do you want the blue pajamas or the green ones?"</li></ul>                     |
|         | 7:45 PM | Step 5: Quiet Activity          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Read a calming story (e.g., Goodnight Moon or Guess How Much I Love You).</li><li>Dim lights and speak softly.</li></ul>                                   |
|         | 8:00 PM | Step 6: Lights Down & Goodnight | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Turn off bright lights, use a night-light if needed.</li><li>Say the same goodnight phrase each night: "Sweet dreams, see you in the morning."</li></ul>   |

# MY BEDTIME CHECKLIST



- Put on pajamas
- Brush my teeth
- Wash my face
- Go potty
- Pick a bedtime story
- Snuggle into bed
- Say goodnight hugs & kisses
- Lights out



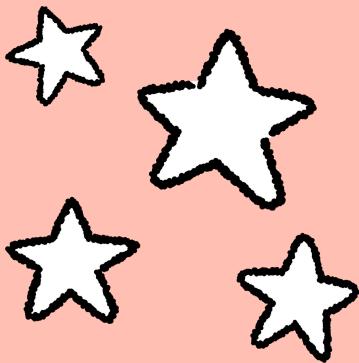
\* Lights out

# Top 10 Calming Bedtime Stories for Young Children

Here are a few of our favorite bedtime books. They are chosen for gentle language, soothing illustrations, and predictable patterns—all helpful for children with Autism who thrive on calm and routine.

- *Breathe with Me: Using Breath to Feel Strong, Calm, and Happy* by Mariam Gates. Encourages breathing exercises through a story—great for sensory regulation.
- *Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site* by Sherri Duskey Rinker. Favorite trucks settle in for the night, combining interest with relaxation.
- *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown. A gentle, rhythmic classic that helps children wind down with familiar objects and soothing repetition.
- *Goodnight Owl* by Greg Pizzoli. Simple, repetitive text that helps children anticipate bedtime.
- *Guess How Much I Love You* by Sam McBratney—a sweet story about love and reassurance, perfect for bedtime bonding.
- *I Am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness* by Susan Verde. Introduces calming concepts and mindfulness in a child-friendly way.
- *Sleepyheads* by Sandra Howatt. Beautiful illustrations and gentle rhymes about animals preparing for sleep.
- *The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep* by Carl-Johan Forssén Ehrlin. Written with relaxation techniques to help children drift off naturally.
- *The Going to Bed Book* by Sandra Boynton. Short, humorous, and calming—ideal for toddlers who need a lighthearted wind down.
- *Time for Bed* by Mem Fox. Soft rhymes and cozy illustrations create a peaceful bedtime atmosphere.





# Discussing sleep with your pediatrician

If your child's sleep problems are persistent or severe, it's a good idea to check in with a doctor. Here are some signs that warrant a medical evaluation:

- Breathing concerns during sleep: Snoring, gasping, pauses in breathing, or labored breathing can indicate sleep apnea or other issues.
- Frequent bedwetting beyond the typical age range, especially if it's new or accompanied by other symptoms.
- Extreme difficulty falling or staying asleep despite consistent routines and environmental changes.
- Daytime effects: Excessive sleepiness, irritability, or behavioral changes that interfere with daily functioning.
- Unusual movements or behaviors during sleep, such as repeated jerking, kicking, or night terrors.
- Persistent early morning waking or very short sleep duration that impacts health and development.

If you notice any of these signs, or if sleep challenges are causing significant stress for your child or family, consult your pediatrician or a sleep specialist. They can rule out medical conditions and provide tailored guidance.

# Other professionals who can help



**CONTACT  
US**



If your child is having trouble at bedtime—like being very active, struggling to settle down, or having a hard time turning off screens—it can be helpful to talk with an Occupational Therapist or a BCBA. They can assess your child's specific needs and provide strategies that work for your family.

When you meet with any professional about your child's sleep, being clear and prepared makes the conversation more helpful. Here are some easy ways to get ready:

- Keep a short sleep diary for 1–2 weeks: Write down when your child goes to bed, wakes up, naps, and any night wakings. Also note anything unusual, like snoring or restlessness. This gives the provider a clear picture of what's happening.
- Please share what you've already tried: Let them know about routines, changes to the bedroom, or calming strategies you've used so they don't suggest things you've already done.
- Explain your concerns: Talk about how the sleep issues affect your child during the day—mood, behavior, energy—and how it affects your family.
- Please mention any medical signs; if your child snores, has breathing pauses, wets the bed often, or has night terrors, please bring them up so they can consider medical causes.
- Ask what to do next. It's okay to ask whether your child might need a sleep specialist or another type of evaluation.



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Your local Autism connection

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YOUR LOGO

