

SLEEP PROBLEMS

GOAL

To help you support your child's sleep through routines, environmental changes, and behavior-based strategies rooted in ABA.

BACKGROUND

Sleep challenges are extremely common among children with autism. If your child has difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or staying in bed, you're not alone. Children may struggle with sleep for a variety of reasons, including:

- Sensory sensitivities (such as noise, light, or texture of pajamas)
- Irregular routines or unpredictable schedules
- Anxiety or difficulty calming down
- Difficulty understanding sleep-related expectations

But here's the good news: behavioral sleep strategies, when used consistently, can make a big difference. You don't need to wait for perfect conditions to begin helping your child build healthier sleep habits—small steps can lead to meaningful change.

START WITH A MEDICAL CHECK-IN

Sleep challenges can sometimes be linked to medical concerns like sleep apnea, reflux, or other health issues. Even if your child's sleep problems are primarily behavioral, it's helpful to rule out medical causes first.

Here are some questions you can ask your child's doctor:

- Could a medical issue be contributing to my child's sleep challenges?
- Would a referral to a sleep specialist be helpful?
- Are there safe options to consider if behavioral strategies aren't enough?

Having this conversation with your pediatrician ensures that any changes you make are built on a strong, safe foundation.

CREATING A STRONG SLEEP FOUNDATION

Helping your child sleep better starts with building healthy sleep habits. Small, consistent changes can make a big difference over time. This page focuses on setting the stage for better sleep through environment and routine.

SET THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SLEEP

A calm and predictable environment helps signal to your child that it's time to wind down. Think about how the room looks, feels, and sounds at bedtime.

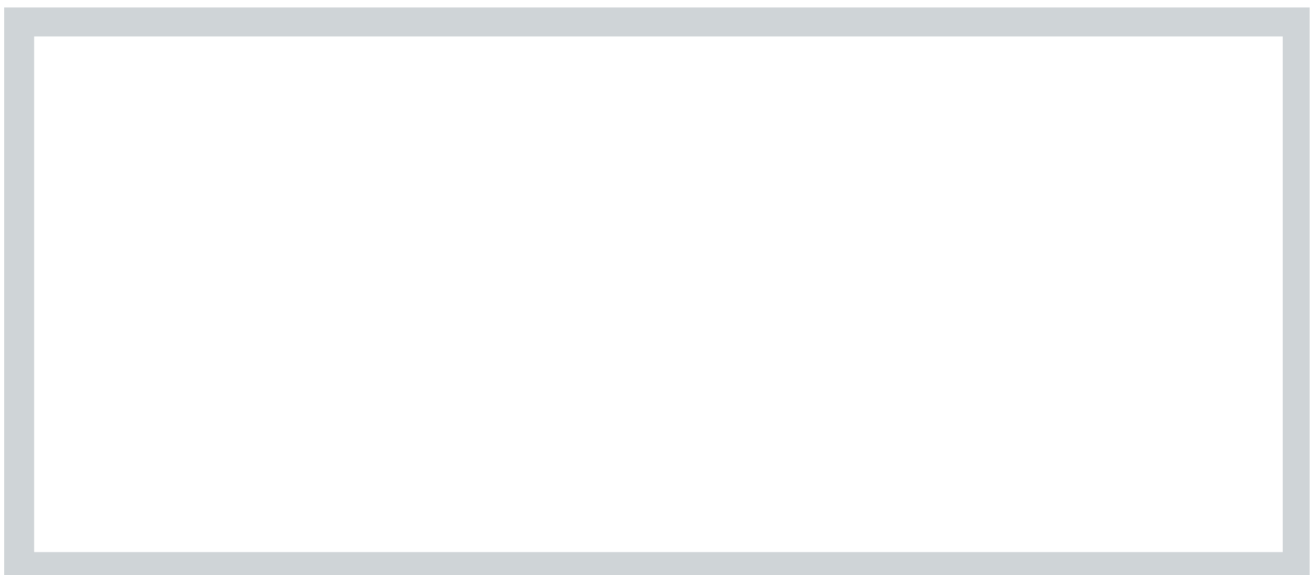
- Dim the lights 30 minutes before bed
- Use blackout curtains or white noise if needed
- Keep the room cool and quiet
- Remove or cover bright or flashing electronics
- Keep toys and distractions out of the bed

BUILD A PREDICTABLE BEDTIME ROUTINE

A simple routine helps your child feel safe and prepares their body for sleep. Repeat the same steps each night so your child learns what to expect.

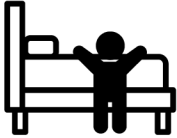
- Keep the routine short (about 20–30 minutes)
- Use the same order every night (e.g., bath, pajamas, book, bed)
- Use visuals to show the steps if helpful
- Keep activities quiet and relaxing
- Avoid screens and high-energy play before bed

What changes could you make to your child's sleep environment or routine this week?



SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD THROUGH SLEEP CHALLENGES

Even with a solid bedtime routine, sleep struggles can still happen. It's important to stay calm, consistent, and responsive to your child's individual needs. This page walks through a few common challenges and what you can do to work through them.



IF YOUR CHILD GETS OUT OF BED

For some children, simply being told "stay in bed" isn't enough—especially if they don't fully understand language. In these cases, consistent redirection is key.

- Calmly return them to bed each time without giving extra attention
- Avoid eye contact or conversation during redirection
- Sit in the room if needed and gradually move closer to the door over time
- Reinforce staying in bed with quiet praise or rewards in the morning



IF YOUR CHILD CRIES OR PROTESTS AT BEDTIME

Crying at bedtime is common, especially when routines change. Make sure your child feels safe and supported, but try not to give in to demands that delay bedtime.

- Stick to the routine even if your child protests
- Offer comfort without extending the routine
- Reinforce calm behavior instead of avoidance
- Let your child know what's coming next using visuals or simple language



IF YOUR CHILD WAKES UP IN THE NIGHT

Night waking can happen for many reasons. The goal is to help your child learn to return to sleep with minimal support.

- Keep interactions brief and boring (no talking, lights, or play)
- Gently guide them back to bed if they get up
- Use a consistent strategy every time
- Talk to your BCBA about a plan if night waking becomes frequent



WHEN TO ADJUST THE PLAN

Some strategies work quickly, while others take time. Be patient, but also know when it's time to make adjustments.

- Track your child's sleep to see what's improving
- Look for patterns (Is bedtime too late? Naps too long?)
- Check in with your BCBA if you're unsure what's working
- Don't hesitate to revisit the routine or environment if needed

STAYING CONSISTENT WITHOUT THE STRESS

When your child is struggling with sleep, it can be easy to give in or feel discouraged. But staying calm and consistent is key—even when it's hard. This page will help you avoid common pitfalls while staying on track with your child's sleep goals.

Do this:

- ✓ **Stick to the plan, even when it's tough**

Consistency helps your child learn what to expect, which builds trust and understanding over time.
- ✓ **Keep your responses calm and brief**

Overreacting or engaging too much can accidentally reinforce the behaviors you're trying to change.
- ✓ **Celebrate small wins**

Even one night with fewer wake-ups is progress. Point out the positive and build from there.

Not this:

- ✗ **Don't start negotiating at bedtime**

This can turn into a nightly pattern that delays sleep and increases power struggles.
- ✗ **Don't change the routine out of frustration**

It takes time for routines to work. Frequent changes make it harder for your child to adjust.
- ✗ **Don't forget to take care of yourself**

When you're exhausted, it's harder to stay consistent. Ask for help and rest when you can.

What's one small thing you can do this week to stay calm and consistent at bedtime—even on tough nights?

PLANNING FOR PROGRESS

Sleep improvements don't always happen overnight. That's why it helps to plan ahead—not just for what you'll do tonight, but how you'll handle challenges over time. This page will help you prepare for setbacks and build long-term success.

WHAT TO DO WHEN THINGS GET OFF TRACK

Even with a solid plan, there will be nights when things don't go as expected. That's normal. What matters most is how you respond.

- ✓ Stay calm and return to the routine as soon as possible.
- ✓ Avoid adding extra attention or rewards for staying up late.
- ✓ Think about what might have disrupted sleep (illness, change in routine, stress).
- ✓ Talk to your BCBA® for support if problems continue.
- ✓ Be kind to yourself—progress is rarely perfect.

SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

To make sleep habits stick, you'll want to look beyond the first few nights. These reminders can help you stay the course:



Make routines sustainable. Choose a bedtime routine you can realistically stick with most nights.



Prepare the whole family. Let siblings and other caregivers know the plan so everyone's on the same page.



Track patterns over time. Use a sleep log or talk to your BCBA® about trends in your child's sleep.



Be flexible when needed. Life happens. If your child gets sick or there's a trip coming up, just do your best to return to the routine afterward.

Sticking with the plan—even when it's hard—helps your child feel safe, supported, and ready for sleep.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S SLEEP SUCCESS

Good sleep doesn't just depend on bedtime routines—it's also shaped by what happens during the day, how we respond to our child at night, and how we adjust over time. This page offers practical ways to support your child's sleep success from multiple angles.

DURING THE DAY: SET THE STAGE FOR SLEEP

What happens during the day can have a big impact on how easily your child falls asleep at night. These daytime habits can help:

- Get plenty of physical activity (but avoid high-energy play right before bed).
- Provide exposure to natural light in the morning.
- Keep naps consistent and age-appropriate.
- Avoid caffeine and sugary snacks late in the day.
- Stick to a predictable daily routine when possible.

AT BEDTIME: KEEP IT CALM AND PREDICTABLE


A calming and consistent bedtime routine signals to your child that it's time to wind down. Keep routines simple and manageable:

- Use a visual schedule with 3–5 steps (e.g., bath, brush teeth, story).
- Keep your tone and body language calm and steady.
- Avoid screens 1 hour before bed.
- Offer a consistent phrase like "It's time for sleep now" to end the routine.
- Use the same sleep space each night to create predictability.

WHEN THEY WAKE UP: STAY CONSISTENT

Night wakings are common. How you respond can shape future sleep habits.

- Return your child to bed calmly and quietly.
- Minimize conversation or stimulation.
- Use the same response each time to avoid confusion.
- Avoid reinforcing night wakings with snacks, play, or screen time.
- Track how often your child wakes to look for patterns or progress.



**Sleep is the golden chain
that ties health and our
bodies together.**

~Thomas Dekker