



FASD and Sleep

Sleep issues among children with FASD are common. Many children experience “disturbed sleep”, which can look like:

- Trouble falling asleep at bedtime (taking more than 20 minutes to fall asleep)
- Frequently waking up at night (for minutes or hours)
- Early morning awakenings
- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning
- Tired, hyperactive or irritable during the day
- Sleep-walking or sleep-talking
- Restless sleep (tossing and turning)

Why is Sleep Important?

- Poor sleep at night can lead to problems with learning, memory, attention, mood, and behaviours including hyperactivity, aggression, and impulsivity.
- Sleep is also important for development, and if sleep issues are long lasting, they may prevent children from reaching their potentials in cognitive and motor development.
- Poor sleep for a child means poor sleep for their parents/caregivers! This can lead to stress and frustration for the whole family.
- Without addressing and treating sleep issues, the effect of all other treatments might be reduced.

What Might Be Causing Poor Sleep?

- Children with FASD might have difficulty sleeping through the night due to various factors, with perhaps more than one factor acting at the same time. These factors include: brain differences, health problems, poor sleep routines, and emotional or social issues.
- Children with FASD often have differences in the processing of sensory information from their bodies that are in charge of seeing, listening, tasting, touching, smelling, along with senses in charge of knowing where their bodies are in space, how fast their bodies are moving, and giving feedback from joint and muscles.
- These differences can affect how sensory information from the environment and the body is organized in the brain. For example, soft noises can seem loud and irritating, small amounts of light can seem overwhelming or the feeling of pajamas or blankets can be uncomfortable.
- Each child with FASD has individual sensory processing needs that are unique to them and may affect sleep in a different way.
- Children with FASD may have abnormal secretions of the hormone melatonin. Melatonin is released by the brain and responsible for *when* we sleep, *how long* we sleep, and *how well* we sleep. When children don't secrete enough melatonin at night, they have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep and waking up early in the morning.

Children with FASD are up to 5 times more likely than typically developing children to have sleep issues.



What Can I Do? Strategies and Solutions

One of the first steps for helping children with sleep issues involves promoting good sleep habits through sleep hygiene.

Sleep Hygiene is the promotion of good sleep routines by improving the sleep environment, using sleep promoting activities and scheduling sleep. It is the first strategy to try, and these need to be trialed consistently for 2-4 weeks to see if they are helping. Keeping a sleep record during this period helps determine success.

According to medical literature, the first step in the treatment of sleep disorders is sleep hygiene.

Without treatment, sleep problems can continue into adulthood.

Sleep Environment

Following are solutions and strategies for the bedroom to help with sleep:

SIGHT

- Use dimmer lights to decrease brightness.
- Use simple sheets (no pattern) and neutral room colours to reduce visual stimuli.
- Use light-blocking window shades.
- If possible, a bedroom should be totally dark (even low light levels can inhibit melatonin secretion).

TOUCH

- Cut tags off pyjamas or bedding since it may irritate the skin.
- Use plain or soft-textured bedding to decrease stimulation and/or irritation to skin.
- Be aware of child's material preferences for pajamas and bedding, e.g. flannel vs. lycra or loose-fitting vs. snug.

SOUND

- Use ear plugs, sleep machines or white noise machines to block out noise.
- Listen to soothing music (meditation songs or songs with 60-80 beats per minute).
- Carpeting on floors can absorb noise.

JOINT SENSE AND MOVEMENT

- Use deep pressure/massage at bedtime to help kids settle down (can be done with hands or items such as a sleeping bag). Try this only as much as child will tolerate.
- Use slow back-and-forth, rhythmical rocking to help with settling (e.g. rocking chair).
- Use oversized quilts or heavy blankets – the weight can provide added deep pressure and can be comforting.

SMELL

- Do not use laundry detergents, soaps/shampoos or toothpastes with strong scents.
- Try calming scents (e.g. vanilla, lavender, banana).
- Bedtime snack ideas such as warm foods, sucking liquids through a straw, and foods that need to be chewed are helpful.

OTHER

- Do not use the bedroom for punishment. This room should be a place that is comfortable, familiar and not exciting.
- Keep the bedroom layout consistent and uncluttered.
- Avoid co-sleeping as this increases the risk of sleep issues.
- Avoid TV in the bedroom.

Sleep-promoting Activities

Following are activities to help with sleep success:

- Use regularly scheduled movement breaks and "heavy work" (pushing/lifting activities) during the day to help the child become more settled at bedtime. It is better for the caregiver to structure and organize this activity.
- Avoid screentime (e.g. TV, video games, computer games) 1 to 2 hours before bedtime. Studies say pre-bed screentime is related to delayed onset of sleep.
- No roughhousing before bed.
- Pre-warm the child at least 30-60 minutes before bedtime.
- Avoid foods with sugar or caffeine close to bedtime.
- Use calming activities before bedtime to reduce the time it takes to settle for sleep (e.g. rocking, warm bath, massage).
- Use a soft voice and simple instructions at bedtime.
- Use visual schedules as a prompt for bedtime routine. This may include pictures of having a bath, then brushing teeth, then putting on pyjamas, etc.
- Read age-appropriate stories, avoid books that stimulate the mind or senses (e.g. scary books, touch books or books with sound).
- Provide opportunities for exposure to natural lighting during the day (e.g. outdoor play in sunshine). Daylight aids in the production of nocturnal melatonin which helps improve sleep.

Consult With Your Occupational Therapist For More Information.



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Sleep Schedule

Schedules, routines and structure are important not just at bedtime but all day long.

- Enforce routines, rules and consistency.
- Maintain the same schedule on weekends and holidays.
- Include a scheduled "wind down" time (30-60 minutes) before bedtime.

Medication

- If sleep strategies are not working, you may want to discuss a trial of medication with your child's doctor.
- Melatonin may be helpful to establish a sleep schedule. Talk to your doctor about whether this is a good option for you and your child.
- Discuss the effects of your child's current medications on sleep.