

# Sleep, Wonderful Sleep

## Special Needs Kids Present Challenges for Weary Parents



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It's common for children to have difficulties falling asleep and staying asleep. These difficulties can continue to plague children into adolescence. When it comes to special needs children, sleep issues are even more complex, demanding patience and long-term solutions from parents and physicians.

"Lack of sleep in the short term affects our behavior," notes Gary Feldman, M.D., medical director, Stamski Children's Developmental Center, MemorialCare Miller Children's & Women's Hospital Long Beach. "We get cranky and forgetful, and it's the same for kids. But it manifests in a different way for children with special needs."

These children have the same types of learning and concentration issues stemming from lack of sleep as their so-called neuro-typical peers, Dr. Feldman explains, but their hyperactivity and inattention is worse, and they can be overly aggressive.

"The concept is, whatever healthy children have [regarding sleep issues], the behavior is more frequent, severe and more prolonged in children with disabilities," he says. "Whether it's falling asleep, staying asleep or a lack of sleep, the resulting behavior is compounded in special needs kids."

Growing children from infants to 1-year-old need 12 hours of sleep. In preschool, kids need 11 hours. It decreases from there as kids grow, with elementary school children requiring 9-10 hours and high schoolers and adults needing at least 8 hours.

"If your child isn't sleeping, or if they wake up multiple times per night, and the usual means of soothing them – rocking, singing, nursing – aren't effective, then it may require intervention," Dr. Feldman recommends.

In many cases, he added, wakefulness is a

learned behavior and children can be re-trained with consistent practice.

"We use the same template for helping parents and kids," Dr. Feldman notes, "but the complexities presented by special needs children can mean that medication is necessary. Special needs kids have multiple medical issues that lead to a number of difficulties we must treat."

Because no children's sleep medications are FDA-approved, physicians may choose to administer prescription drugs that have sleepiness as a side effect, he added, such as antihistamines or antidepressants.

At the Stamski Children's Developmental Center at Miller Children's & Women's, Dr. Feldman says a team of specialized medical professionals understand the symptoms presented by special needs children and can develop personalized programs that ease the burden sleepless children pose to their parents.

Methods parents of special needs children can consider include:

- **Good sleep hygiene.** It's important for kids to avoid eating, playing videos and watching TV right before they go to bed. Instead, they should engage in low-key activities, such as reading or listening to soft music.
- **Stick to a routine.** Brushing teeth, washing face and hands, and using the bathroom are part of a pre-sleep routine.

Adopting predictable habits can ease children into sleepiness.

- **A comfortable environment.** A safe, calm environment helps children feel protected and relaxed. Little things matter, such as sheets that seem too scratchy to an autistic child or a mattress that doesn't conform to a kid with spinal problems.
- **The whole picture.** Dr. Feldman notes that sometimes the cause of sleeplessness can be right under our noses. For instance, children with special needs can experience heightened anxiety and stress from internal and social triggers. These triggers can surround a range of situations, including a health crisis, changing schools, parents going through a divorce or moving to a new home. Paying attention to cues and recording any outbursts or difficult behaviors that your child displays can help you identify what may be at the root of the problem.

"Sleep issues in special needs children can be extremely difficult to treat," he says.

"We've had to work over the years to see its effects on families and to learn the kinds of things we can use to try to help them get some rest."

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