Sleep is a basic human need just like water, food, and shelter. However, as many as 80% of children/teens with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have experienced some level of sleep problems (difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep during the night, and/or excessively sleeping). Sleep problems occur in individuals with ASD regardless of cognitive level. The potential causes for these sleep issues range from children with ASD not understanding the importance of sleep to neurological, behavioral, and/or medical issues.

**Why is Sleep Important?**

The amount of sleep that each person needs to function can vary by the individual. The current sleep recommendation for adolescents to perform at their best is between 8-10 hours per night. However, research indicates that older children and teens with ASD are sleeping less than their peers without ASD. Not getting enough sleep or sleeping excessively can cause a teen with ASD to have more difficulty with academic and/or social/behavioral functioning. Lack of sleep can cause teens to become exhausted, which can increase challenging behaviors, and can negatively impact their ability to attend school consistently and/or maintain steady employment. These sleep problems can also cause stress and anxiety in teens with ASD, as well as their parents, caregivers, and/or siblings.
Seek Support from Medical Professionals

Determine if there are unaddressed medical issues
When trying to determine which strategies to use to help your teen improve sleep habits, it is best to consult your doctor to determine if your teen's sleep difficulties are a result of an underlying medical condition (e.g., gastrointestinal, diabetes, seizures, depression, sleep apnea, etc.) or the due to medication.

Keep a sleep diary
A sleep diary can help you and your doctor have a better idea about your teen’s sleep patterns and habits. The diary may aid your doctor with a diagnosis of sleep disorders and help to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies that you are using at home. A basic sleep diary should include the following information:
- Time your teen goes to bed and wakes up
- Total number of hours your teen slept
- How many times your teen woke up at night and the duration of the waking period
- List of strategies used to help your teen improve sleep habits

You may need to check in with your teen in order to complete some of these items. You could ask your teen to help monitor their own sleep or use some type of technology (e.g., activity trackers that can be worn on the wrist) for tracking sleep.

Strategies to Improve Sleep

Explain the importance of sleep
Some teens may not understand how sleep impacts their growth and well-being. Explain to your teen that he/she needs to get a good night sleep to be healthy. Be clear in your definition of a good night’s sleep (e.g., going to bed at a designated time, sleeping for about 8 hours, sleeping throughout the night). For some teens, a simple social story may better help them understand why they need to sleep.

Establish a bedtime routine
Develop a short, easy to follow bedtime routine for your teen to follow. A visual schedule can be an effective tool to help teens get used to, follow a new routine, and promote independence.
- Set a specific time for your teen to go to bed at night and wake up in the morning. Be sure to use the routine consistently (even on the weekends) to help your teen internalize the routine.
- The routine should begin no more than 1 hour before bedtime and can include relaxing activities such as reading a book, yoga/meditation, gentle massage, and/or listening to soft music.

Create a comfortable sleep environment
At bedtime, your teen’s bedroom needs to be a place that is calming and that has limited distractions.
Try to make the room dark and quiet, because some teens with ASD may be sensitive to certain noises. Blackout curtains may help reduce the amount of outside light.

Keep the room at a cool temperature. Research indicates that temperatures at or just below 70 degrees Fahrenheit are optimal for sleeping.

Remove possible distractors at bedtime, such as televisions, video games, computers, and/or phones, so that your teen will not be tempted to use these items rather than going to sleep.

Ensure diet and exercise habits are supportive of sleep

During the day, incorporate exercise and a healthy diet to aid in your teen’s ability to fall asleep.

- Exercising during the day can help a teen sleep longer and deeper at night. However, exercising too close to bedtime can cause your teen to have a difficult time settling down to fall asleep. Exercise should end at least two hours before bedtime.

- Avoid caffeine and sugary drinks in the evening such as sodas, caffeinated tea, chocolate, and coffee. If your child’s routine includes having a snack before bedtime, try to phase out caffeinated items by replacing them with healthier alternatives, such caffeine free and low/no sugar beverages and/or snacks.
Resources

**AFIRM Module: Exercise**

**AFIRM Module: Self-management**

**AFIRM Module: Social Narratives**

**AFIRM Module: Visual Supports**

**References**

