

# Sleep education helps families of autistic children

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Parent sleep education is beneficial in improving sleep and aspects of daytime behavior and family functioning in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), according to a Vanderbilt study published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Vanderbilt joined with the University of Colorado Denver and the University of Toronto to carry out a study of 80 children with ASD, ages 2-10 years, primarily focused on teaching parents the basics of sleep education.

"We found that one hour of one-on-one sleep education or four hours of group sleep education delivered to parents, combined with two brief follow-up phone calls, improved sleep as well as anxiety, attention, [repetitive behavior](#) and quality of life in children with ASD who had difficulty falling asleep," said study author Beth Malow, M.D., professor of Neurology and Pediatrics, and the Burry Professor of Cognitive Childhood Development.

"The parents also benefited; they reported a higher level of parenting competence after completing the education sessions. The one-on-one and group sessions showed similar levels of success. In contrast, an earlier study that simply gave parents a pamphlet without guidance on how to use it did not provide the same level of improvement in child sleep."

Before entering the study, all children were examined for medical

conditions that could cause [sleep problems](#), such as [gastrointestinal disorders](#) or seizures. In the instructional sessions, parents learned about daytime and evening habits that promote sleep, including the importance of increasing exercise, limiting caffeine during the day and minimizing use of video games and computers close to bedtime.

Sleep educators helped parents put together a visual schedule for their children to help them establish a [bedtime routine](#) and discussed ways to help children get back to sleep if they woke up at night.

Malow, also a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center investigator, said future studies are needed to determine the best approaches for providing sleep education to families, including those related to telemedicine and Internet-based technologies. Malow and her colleagues within the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network are also developing partnerships with local pediatric practices to provide training on [sleep](#) education.

Content from the sessions is available to download for free on the Autism Speaks website. A toolkit, "Strategies to Improve Sleep in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders," and three Quick Tips sheets are currently posted here.

"We are grateful to Autism Speaks for all of their support with our research and our toolkit materials. With their support, we have been able to help many children with ASD and their families get the rest they need to be at their best during the day," Malow said. "We are also appreciative to all of the families who participated in this research."

Provided by Vanderbilt University Medical Center

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