

Stardust Melodies

by Thomas A. McKean (09/10/09)

(Author's Note: This is a small update to an article I wrote many years ago for the Advocate, the quarterly newsletter of the Autism Society of America.)

It is well known that one of the symptoms of autism is problems sleeping. Some don't sleep at all, while others (myself included) seem to sleep way too much. Both can lead to problems.

So what can be done to make sleep go better, easier and even healthier for individuals with autism?

Below are a few ideas you may want to try.

Bedtime Routine:

One of the easiest things you can do to improve your child's sleep is to work on the bedtime routine. A regular bedtime and wake up time may be difficult, yet it will be very helpful. Also consider the environment around bedtime. If there is noise from socializing or from a television elsewhere in the house, it may have a negative effect on your child's sleep. Also, be sure to have the same routine before bed and do things in the same order. This can help promote sleep.

Weighted Blanket:

This would be for the children who crave pressure. Weighted blankets can make a big difference in sleep. They are expensive, though there are instructions on the net on how to make your own. The weighted blanket helps those who have underdeveloped tactile and/or proprioceptive systems to recognize where the various parts of their body are. This helps them to feel more comfortable and that aids in sleep.

Sound Devices and CDs:

White noise has long been known to help people get to sleep. The problem with autism here is that most white noise generators have around five to ten seconds of noise that continuously loops. Children and adults with autism can pick up on this quickly and the generator then serves more to keep them awake than to put them to sleep.

On my site -- <http://www.thomasamckean.com> -- there are CDs I have made of nature sounds in the Blue Ridge Mountains where I live. These were made with high quality recording equipment and do not loop. This is one solution to this problem you might consider. There is also software on the web that can generate random white noise and nature sounds. There are a few freeware programs that do this, and I will be posting them on <http://www.neurointegrity.com> soon.

Of course, the more frugal among you might want to try a fan, which will do the same thing, or you can use an analog radio that is tuned between stations, thus producing white noise static.

Melatonin:

Melatonin is a natural hormone which helps us to sleep. Synthetic melatonin has been used also for this purpose. The last I heard, the jury was still out on safety and appropriate dosages. One thing we do know is that by using Melatonin on a child, it may delay the child's puberty. Some parents who were aware of this have decided to use it anyway because they felt it was worth the delay. If you decide to try Melatonin for your own child, please research it thoroughly so you can make an educated decision.

Medications:

Medication is an option, but should be used as a last resort. Especially if you have a young child who has problems sleeping. I know of parents who have had some success with Benedryl, though many parents have also reported Benedryl has had the opposite effect, making the child hyper all night. Again, it is wise to be educated before you start giving your child drugs.

By following some simple common sense ideas, you may find a way to help your child get the sleep he or she needs.