

Common problems and possible strategies

David Bramble is a consultant psychiatrist who works for Shropshire CAMHS and specialises in the mental health of children with learning disabilities. He has a longstanding interest in children's sleep problems and works with a number of children on the autism spectrum and their families. He suggests the following strategies to be tried for common sleep problems: (Taken from the 2006 BILD conference: Valuing good practice in autism)

Children who insist on parent's presence

Graded withdrawal

1. Lie next to child on bed for three nights.
2. Lie on mattress next to bed for three nights.
3. Move mattress closer to door every three nights.
4. Sit on chair in bedroom at door with door open for three nights.
5. Sit outside door whilst still visible to child for three nights.
6. Sit outside door not visible to child for three nights.
7. Sit outside room with door closed for three nights.

Social stories could also be used to reassure your child that they are safe when sleeping/alone.

For night waking

Scheduled awakening

1. From sleep diary see when child wakes up during the night.
2. Set alarm clock for 30 minutes before this.

3. Wake child and allow to fall back to sleep.
4. If child doesn't fall back to sleep try waking 45 minutes before on the next night and experiment until you find the best time.

To ensure your child is sleepy at bed time

Restricting sleep:

1. From sleep diary see average hours of sleep per night.
2. Calculate ninety percent of this and make this the new sleeping time (delay bedtime and/or waking time) – never restrict below five hours.
3. If lying awake occupy in another room until sleepy.
4. Avoid naps in day/oversleeping at weekend.
5. After a week move settling/waking time by 15 minutes - continue until desired pattern of sleep occurs.

Summary

None of these suggestions can be guaranteed to work in themselves. You may find that a combination of them proves most effective. Close examination of your child's sleep diaries is likely to give you the greatest insight into what is causing your child's problems and which solution is most likely to work. When implementing these strategies, problem might get worse before it gets better. However it's important to remain consistent in your approach. Rewarding and praise following a better night's sleep will help to positively reinforce it.