



FASD-CAN AOTEAROA INFORMATION SHEETS

FASD and Sleep – Expanded Resource

Undisturbed sleep is important for all human beings. It allows the body and brain to heal, grow, rest and reset. If children do not get quality sleep they may become irritable or hyper-active, and it can affect their daily coping abilities and behaviour, as well as their long-term growth, mental health and wellbeing.

While every child is slightly different in terms of how much sleep they need, most require the following to be fully rested.

Age	Recommended	Not recommended
Newborns <i>0-3 months</i>	14 to 17 hours	Less than 11 hours More than 19 hours
Infants <i>4-11 months</i>	12 to 15 hours	Less than 10 hours More than 18 hours
Toddlers <i>1-2 years</i>	11 to 14 hours	Less than 9 hours More than 16 hours
Preschoolers <i>3-5 years</i>	10 to 13 hours	Less than 8 hours More than 14 hours
School-aged Children <i>6-13 years</i>	9 to 11 hours	Less than 7 hours More than 12 hours
Teenagers <i>14-17 years</i>	8 to 10 hours	Less than 7 hours More than 11 hours
Young Adults <i>18-25 years</i>	7 to 9 hours	Less than 6 hours More than 11 hours

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The brain of an individual with FASD works at least as three times as hard as a neuro-typical brain to get through a day. It is exhausting for them – each day is the mental equivalent of running a marathon and they need sleep to recharge for the next day.

It is common for a person with FASD to have sleep problems because they are overly sensitive to their environment (e.g. sound), and they seem to be able to keep going despite not getting enough sleep.

Sleep problems experienced by a person with FASD include long delays before they fall asleep, waking often during the night, having nightmares, sleep-walking and sleep-talking, and of course being tired during the day.¹

Lack of sleep interferes with their ability to think, and it affects their energy levels, focus, and behaviour. Without sleep, all other interventions and strategies put in place to help the individual and whanāu / family are likely to be much less effective.

If an FASD or other neurodivergent person does not sleep, their brains can lead them into all kinds of trouble given their tendencies to be impulsive, risk takers, and unable to think of likely consequences.

And of course if they are not sleeping, it's likely that neither are you. As a caregiver, you need to be able to sleep without worrying about what your individual is up to, so that you can cope with what the next day has in store. Having to be hypervigilant is exhausting for you too!

SUGGESTIONS FOR BETTER SLEEP HABITS

1. **Establish a solid bedtime routine.** This gives the individual a clear message every night that they are going to sleep soon. It gives them the security their brain needs to lower anxiety by knowing in advance what is going to happen next. Develop the routine with the individual (depending on age and ability), write it up formally, laminate it if you can and put it somewhere like the bathroom where they can check it off as they work through their routine. Visual cues like stickers of a person doing the activity (e.g. brushing their teeth) that they can move to a new space when they have done the activity can be fun and reinforces the routine. After a while you may not need to get them to tick off each item on the routine list, but consistency in using the routine is important.
2. **De-stimulate their sleep area.**
Keep their bedroom or sleeping area as simple, quiet, and de-cluttered as possible. This may not always be possible if they are sharing a room, but if there is nothing much in their sleeping area to stimulate and engage their brain, they are more likely to fall asleep and stay asleep. So try not to put things up on the walls, ensure all technology is removed, and use soft lighting – blackout curtains can be helpful.
3. **Exercise.** Engaging in regular physical activity during the day will promote better sleep at night. Encourage activities that suit the child's interests and abilities, such as bike riding, swimming, or playing sports.
4. **Soothing drinks.** Try giving a glass of warm milk as part of the bedtime routine. Milk contains calcium and calcium is a nutrient that helps the brain make melatonin, a natural hormone

¹ James E. Jan, et.al., "[Sleep Health Issues for Children with FASD: Clinical Considerations](#)", International Journal of Pediatrics, Volume 2010 (2010), Article ID 639048

that helps people sleep. If not milk, try having a herbal tea (chamomile or other 'Sleepytime' blend). Avoid caffeine or sugary foods generally for those with FASD, but certainly close to bedtime, as these can interfere with sleep.

5. **Avoid screens.** The blue light emitted by electronic devices can disrupt the natural sleep-wake cycle. Instead, encourage calming activities like reading or listening to soft, rhythmic music with no words, or alternatively soundscapes (white noise, ocean or rain sounds). There are many apps available for this.
6. **Warm water:** Try including a bath as part of the bedtime routine. Most people find a warm bath relaxing, it sends sleepy messages to the brain, and puts a person in good mind frame for sleep. A hot shower is a good second option.
7. **Breathing techniques.** Practice relaxing breathing techniques with your child as part of a bedtime routine – it may be calming for you, too!
8. **Touch.** You can try giving the individual a massage, depending on your individual's touch sensitivity. Some will find a 10-15 minute massage before they go to sleep very relaxing, will others might not be keen at all. Some individuals find weighted blankets very helpful.
9. **Plant positive ideas.** Discuss quietly with your child what they are going to think and dream about that night. Try and re-direct all negative events, emotions, and thoughts about the day to positive thoughts. Plant positive ideas in their minds, and talk to them about what they will see, hear, smell, feel, and taste in their positive dream – using the senses as a reinforcement of the positive thoughts and ideas can be helpful. Some individuals may also get anxious about what is happening the next day. Go over tomorrow's plan with them to allay their concerns.
10. **Be safe.** Secure the individual's sleeping area so you can relax yourself and get some rest. Put security stays on all windows that can be opened, and contact alarms if possible on the outside of the door (or doors) to the sleeping area. This way you will be reassured that you will be alerted if the individual tries to leave the bedroom.
11. **Check medications:** If your loved one is on stimulants during the day (e.g. Ritalin) then you are likely to have quite a problem getting your individual to sleep. If this is the case, or all above strategies you have tried have not worked, ask your doctor if it would be appropriate to prescribe melatonin. Melatonin is a hormone our bodies naturally produce to help us sleep and our tamariki or rangatahi with FASD may need more of it than most. It is not addictive like sleeping pills and may be able to give everyone the rest they need.



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