Quick Tips

Improving Sleep for Children with Autism

Using a Visual Schedule to Teach Bedtime Routines

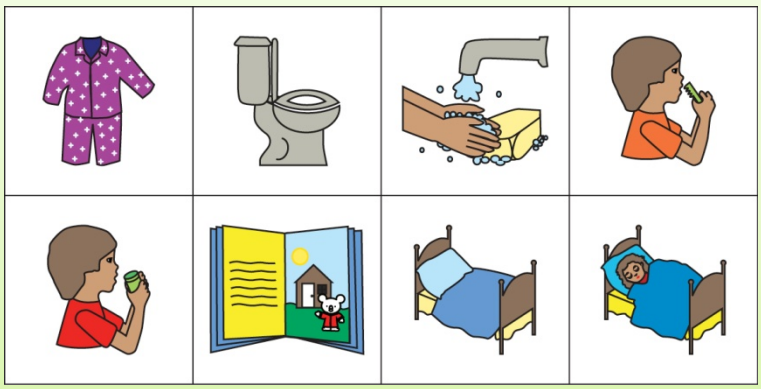
A visual schedule is a set of pictures that shows what happens during the day. It can also be used to show what will happen during an activity. A visual schedule can help break down a task that has many steps. This helps someone learn and follow each step. Visual schedules show children when activities will happen during the day. This helps some children feel less anxious and be more flexible. Visual schedules can be used for many activities, not just for sleep. Some families may want to try a visual schedule during the day. Other families may want to start to use a visual schedule at bedtime. Families should work with their healthcare provider to pick what will work best for them. For a tool kit about visual aids, please go www.autismspeaks.org/atn.

- ***Create a visual bedtime schedule*** that your child will understand. Some children understand checklists; others need pictures, objects, or photographs.
- ***Limit the number of activities*** included within the routine. The routine should generally take about 30 minutes or less for your child to complete. Examples are provided below.
- ***Place stimulating and/or difficult activities early*** in the evening before the bedtime routine begins. Examples include videos (while enjoyable, they stimulate children), computer/video games, etc.
- ***Place relaxing and enjoyable activities at the end*** of the routine, closer to bedtime. Examples include reading a book, listening to quiet music, etc. Keep in mind, some activities are relaxing for some people and not for others.
- ***Place the schedule in the area where the routine is performed*** and at a height that will enable your child to reach each item.
- ***Choose one cue*** to let your child know it is time to check his/her schedule and use this cue consistently. Example of cues include: "time for bed...what's next?"
- Initially, your child may need to be prompted to use the schedule. ***Stand behind your child and physically guide him/her to the schedule. Limit verbal instructions***. Use the visual schedule to communicate the sequence of activities.
- ***Your child should manipulate the schedule***. Guide your child's hand to the schedule, so that your child, not the adult, checks items off the checklist or moves pictures on the schedule.
- ***Use the same icon consistently to represent the same activity***. For example, only use one bath icon to represent "bath time;" only one bed icon to represent "going to bed," etc.
- ***Reward your child for following his/her schedule appropriately***. Rewards can be provided while following the schedule ("Thank you for using your schedule," paired with back rubs, small snack, etc) and when arriving at the correct location ("You are doing a great job using your schedule," paired with tickles, preferred toy/snack, etc).
- ***If the routine must change*** for a night or so, that is okay. Use the visual schedule to show your child which activities will happen that evening and in what order. Try to make the visual an accurate depiction of what will happen.

Sample Bedtime Checklist

- ❑ Put on pajamas
- ❑ Use the bathroom
- ❑ Wash hands
- ❑ Brush teeth
- ❑ Get a drink
- ❑ Read a book
- ❑ Get in bed
- ❑ Go to sleep

Sample Visual Bedtime Routine



Quick Tips

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Bedtime Pass

Some children have a difficult time staying in bed. The parent puts the child to bed and, before you know it, the child is crying out or up again. One effective tool to help children learn to stay in bed is the "bedtime pass."[1] A bedtime pass is a card that is given to the child at bedtime that may be exchanged for one "free" trip out of bed or one parent visit after bedtime. If the child does not use the card during the night, he/she may exchange the card for a special reward in the morning. If the child gets out of bed after surrendering the bedtime pass, the parent is instructed to take the child back to bed with as little attention as possible. The goal of the bedtime pass is to teach the child to stay in bed.

[1] Friman, P., Hoff, K., Schnoes, C., Freeman, K., Woods, D., & Blum, N. (1999). The bedtime pass: An approach to bedtime crying and leaving the room. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, 153,* 1027-1029.

How do I use the pass?

1. Show your child the bedtime pass and explain how it works (or read sample story below with your child).
2. Involve your child in identifying possible rewards that may be earned by holding onto the pass.
3. At bedtime, give your child the pass. You may need to remind him/her how it works and/or reread the story.
4. If your child gets out of bed or requests a parent visit, calmly respond to his/her needs and take the pass.
5. If your child gets out of bed after surrendering the pass, take your child back to bed with as little attention as possible.
6. When your child keeps the pass all night, provide a reward first thing in the morning. Always pair rewards with lots of praise. As your child experiences success keeping the pass, it may be possible to reward your child with stickers (on a sticker chart) or checks (on a point system) and gradually work towards larger rewards.

Resources to Make Schedules or Passes:

- **Personal photographs**
- **Generic photographs**
  - Picture This (www.silverliningmm.com)
- **Line Drawings**
  - Boardmaker (www.mayerjohnson.com)
  - Kid Access (www.kidaccess.com)

Sample Story to Support the Bedtime Pass

People need sleep. Sleep helps people feel rested and have more energy. Sleep helps people stay calm during the day. Sleep helps people do better in school too!

My parents want to help me get a good night's sleep. They want me to be rested, calm, and do well in school. They know that some nights I have trouble going to sleep.

My parents have made a bedtime pass to help me. The bedtime pass is like a ticket. The bedtime pass can be traded for a drink or to get out of bed. If I ask for a drink of water or get out of bed, I have to give them the bedtime pass. When I am able to stay in bed all night, I get to keep the bedtime pass. This is a good thing! In the morning I can trade the bedtime pass for a treat.

A good night's sleep will help me be rested, calm, and do well in school. My parents like it when I get a good night's sleep.

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Sleep Tips for Children with Autism who have Limited Verbal Skills

Ideas in the sleep toolkit may help all children with autism. Here are other ideas that might help children who are nonverbal or have minimal verbal skills. It may also help to be extra aware of your child's sensory needs. What may be calming to one child may be exciting to another. Watch how your child behaves when you try different ideas. You may need to use trial and error to learn what works best for your child.

During the Day:

Help your child get plenty of natural light and exercise. Here are some ideas:

Play games such as wheelbarrow walking, crab walking, seat scoots, and tug of war.

Carry heavy objects (such as groceries, a backpack filled with heavy items) .

Pull or push a wagon or cart filled with heavy items.

Squeeze objects that provide resistance (a balloon filled with flour or corn starch, a stress ball, play dough, or silly putty).

Before Bed:

Try to engage your child in relaxing activities at least an hour before bedtime. These might involve movement, touch, sound, vision, smell, or taste:

- Rocking and Swinging
- Snuggling
- Massaging
- Reading
- Listening to music
- Calming scents
- Eating a light snack
- Wearing a weighted vest
- Chewing gum, vinyl tubing, or crunchy/chewy food
- Keeping the lights down low

In the Bedroom:

Make sure **bedtime clothing** is comfortable.

Use sheets and blankets with **fabrics** that your child likes.

Arrange blankets to provide the right amount of pressure for your child. Consider using a weighted blanket, a sleeping bag, large stuffed animals, or body pillows.

Think about using an **air mattress, foam mattress, or a bed tent**.

Night lights may be calming.

White noise (such as a fan) may be helpful; it should stay on all night if it is on at bedtime.

Schedule Boards:

Some children are not able to use a visual schedule that uses words, photos, or icons. It may help to use objects instead.

Here's an example: Here is how to use an object board. A sample bedtime routine might include using the toilet, taking a bath, washing hair, brushing hair, getting a massage, and listening to music. You would then put the following items near the bathroom or bedroom: a roll of toilet paper, a bar of soap, a bottle of shampoo, a hairbrush, a bottle of lotion, and a CD. Your child would get each object before the start of an activity and use this to guide his or her actions. It may be helpful to save a special object just for bedtime. This might be a special blanket, pillow, or stuffed animal. Once your child has this favored object, he or she should go into his or her bed. Even if you do not use objects, write down your child's schedule so that you are going through the same steps each night and staying with a routine. Use single words or two-word phrases to label or describe what you are doing ("Bath time", "Wash hair", "Go sleep", etc.).

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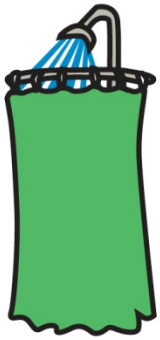
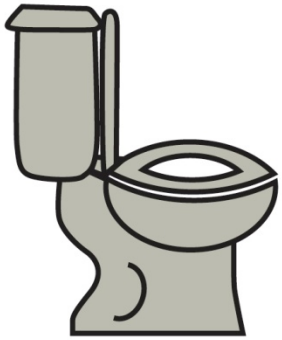
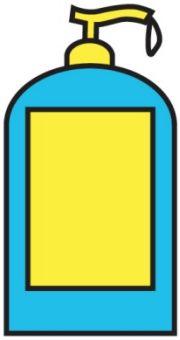
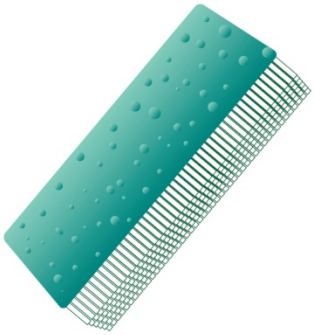
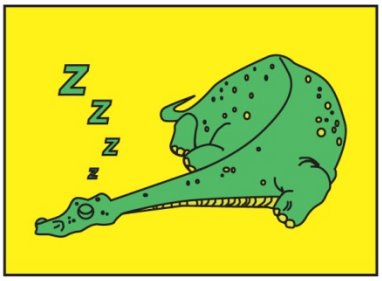
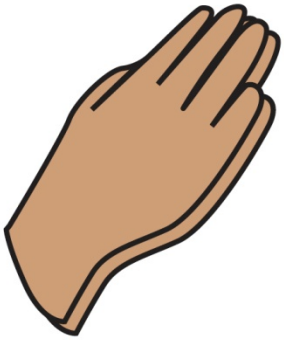
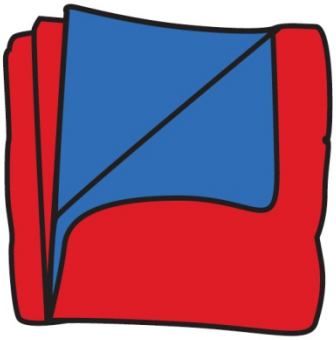
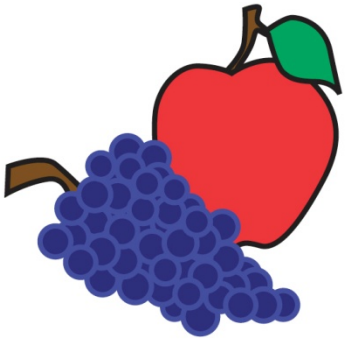
Sample Images for Visual Schedule

Take a bath	Take a shower 	Wash hair
Put on pajamas	Brush teeth	Get a drink
Go to the bathroom 	Go to bed	Go to sleep

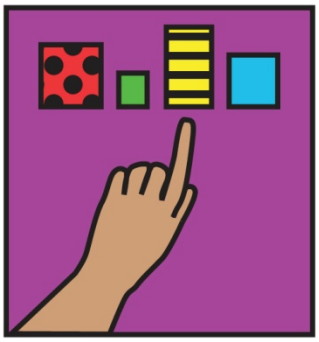
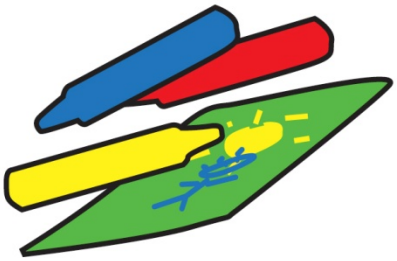
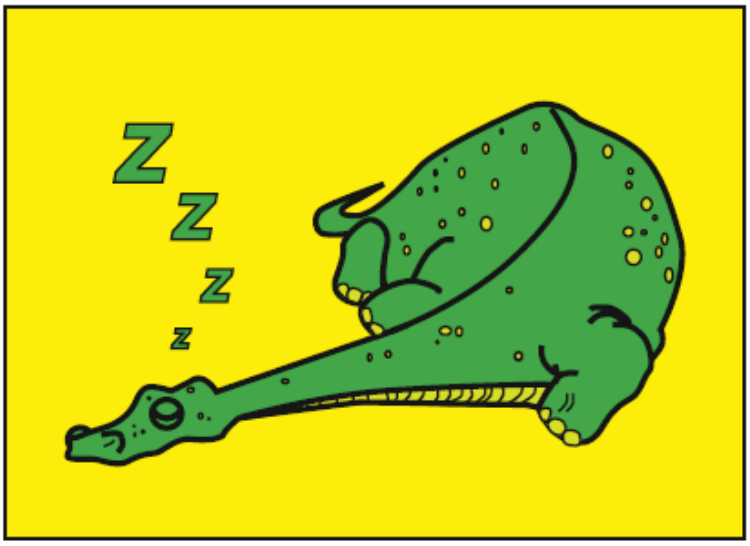
Sample Images for Visual Schedule

Lotion 	Massage	Rocking chair
Brush 	Lights off	Bedtime pass 
Hug & kiss goodnight	Prayers 	Weighted blanket 

Pictures for Bedtime Routine (cont.)

Eat a snack	Take medicine	Wash face & hands
		

Pictures for Bedtime Routine – Choices

Choices 	**Listen to music**	**Sing songs**
Draw 	**Puzzle**	**Read a book**

Sample Images for Bedtime Pass