Title: Parent-based sleep education workshops in autism

Topic: Sleep behavior

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Institution: Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development

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Duration: 1 year

Purpose: To discover ways to help parents address sleep problems that are co-morbid with their child’s autism.

Objectives: Children with autism are more likely than typically developing children to experience sleep difficulties. The most common sleep problem is insomnia, which presents difficulties with falling asleep, maintaining sleep, and early morning awakenings. This pilot study explored the effectiveness of an educational sleep behavior workshop for parents of children with autism and insomnia. The research also examined the relationships between insomnia and children’s daytime behavior, as well as the stress level of parents.

Study: Twenty-two families of children with autism (ages 3-10) experiencing sleep problems participated in the workshops. Each workshop consisted of three, two-hour sessions in which three to five families were present. The sessions, led by a neurology sleep specialist and a pediatrician, consisted of presentations on different aspects of insomnia and sleep behavior, group discussions, questions-and-answer activities, and homework assignments. The three main topics of the sessions were: establishing effective daytime and nighttime habits, minimizing night and early morning awakenings, and individualized sleep concerns. Data on the children’s sleep habits were measured before and after the intervention using the Children’s Sleep Habits Questionnaire, Family Inventory of Sleep Habits, and actigraphy (a watch-like device that measures sleep-wake patterns) to determine the impact of the workshops on the children’s sleep behaviors.

Results: Comparison of the data indicated significant improvements from baseline to the end of the intervention in both sleep habits (as measured by the amount of time it took children to fall asleep, sleep duration, bedtime resistance, sleep anxiety, and presence of a regular bedtime routine) and daytime behavior (as measured by decreased hyperactivity and self-stimulatory behavior). The findings indicated no improvements in night awakenings or parent stress levels, though parents expressed high satisfaction with the program.

Significance and Implications: This study suggests that an educational workshop model can help parents of children with autism address co-morbid sleep problems. However, there are limitations in the research. The study was conducted with a small sample size and no control group. It also lacked an objective measure of daytime behavior or parent stress level, and instead relied on subjective, self-report measures. While the actigraphy did objectively measure sleep
habits, data was not received from all of the participants for this measure. While this study serves as a guide for future, more controlled research investigating the effectiveness of workshops as a tool for addressing the sleep problems of children with autism is needed.

**Practical Relevance:** These findings are important for parents of children with autism who struggle with sleep problems. This study found that workshops for parents can be effective in improving children’s sleep habits and daytime behavior, and suggests that parents may benefit from seeking information (themselves or through a professional) similar to what was presented in these workshops. Neurologists and other professionals should consider offering similar workshops to help parents learn strategies to use at home.

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