

Autism and sleep: Challenges, interventions, and the role of the educational psychologist

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Biography

Dr Nicola Cann is an educational psychologist who trained in the UK before further specialising in sleep. She is the director and founder of The Family Sleep Consultant, an online consultancy service that provides sleep assessment, intervention and training for families, educators and health professionals. Dr Cann has worked with schools and families in the UK, New Zealand, and Asia, in both the public and private sectors.

ABSTRACT

Good sleep influences cognitive, physical and emotional performance, and is instrumental in effective emotional regulation (Alfano & Gamble, 2009). Good sleep also correlates with higher school attendance, academic achievement, higher quality of life, and better long-term physical and mental health outcomes (Gibson et al., 2006; Dahl & Harvey, 2007; Lu et al., 2020). However, sleep problems are common for tamariki and rangatahi, with prevalence estimates ranging between 11% and 47% in the general population (Russo et al., 2007). For tamariki with autism, these prevalence rates are even higher at 30% to 80% (Hirata et al., 2016). For this group poor sleep often significantly impacts whānau relationships, school engagement and performance, and capacity to engage in targeted interventions. Conversely, good sleep can serve as a protective factor against multiple potential negative outcomes.

Emerging research suggests that tamariki and rangatahi with autism experience unique sleep problems (Hollway & Aman, 2013), which are not necessarily addressed by generic sleep interventions (Mazurek et al., 2019; Richdale & Schreck, 2009). Sleep is also an area often overlooked by parents and professionals as other needs tend to take priority (Owens et al., 2022; McLay et al., 2020). However, evidence suggests that sleep can be improved for through effective multi-disciplinary support, and targeted and personalised sleep intervention (Richdale and Schreck, 2009). Educational psychologists can play a significant role in identifying and addressing the sleep needs of these families.

This workshop will be an opportunity for you to

- Learn about the unique sleep needs of tamariki and rangatahi with autism.
- Explore the challenges and opportunities around sleep intervention for this group.
- Review your own practice, and consider how we, as psychologists, can help our tamariki with autism get better sleep