

School-Aged Children Need Plenty of Sleep

A good night's sleep is more than a pause in awake time. While your child slumbers, her body is renewing itself. Growth hormones are flooding her internal engines, reviving brain cells, regulating body temperature and heart rate, and repairing and recharging vital systems.

This nightly trip to the body shop increases your child's resistance to infections and disease. It rejuvenates her mind so that during waking hours she can think clearly and learn quickly.

Lack of adequate sleep interferes with your child's ability to concentrate, remember, and solve problems. Tired children (like tired adults!) are irritable, anxious, easily frustrated, and more impulsive.

How serious is lack of sleep?

- For most people, sleep deprivation (less than six hours a night) is similar to drunkenness in its effects on coordination, reaction time, and judgment. (Occupational and Environmental Medicine, September 2000)
- Driver drowsiness causes 100,000-plus traffic accidents each year; in more than half of them, a sleepy teenager is behind the wheel. (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration)
- A 1998 study involving more than 3,000 high school students reported a correlation between poor grades and inadequate sleep. (Mary A. Carskadon, PhD, Brown University Medical School)

More than 40 winks

Everybody needs a certain amount of uninterrupted sleep every day. Young school age children need at least nine hours. From ages 12 to 22, adolescents'

sleep requirements jump to as much as 10-1/2 hours a day. Their natural sleep cycle also changes dramatically.

According to Carskadon, at puberty adolescents experience a "phase shift" in their inner clock, or circadian timing system. Their bodies' production of melatonin, which controls sleeping and waking cycles, tapers off later in the day than it did in childhood or will again in adulthood.

This phase shift causes teenagers to remain alert and wakeful after their parents and younger siblings have called it a night. In the morning, when their families are bustling around, most teenagers could easily remain dead to the world for a few more hours.

(Aha! Your teenager doesn't stay up and sleep late just to bug you!)

Assisting the sandman

Seventy million Americans don't get enough Zs. Is your child one of them?

Make sure grade school children

- go to bed and get up at the same times every day,
- exercise regularly, but slow down at least an hour before bedtime,
- don't take naps,
- don't drink caffeinated drinks, and
- avoid computer games and television for at least an hour before bedtime.

According to Dr. Judith Owens of Brown University, children who watch a lot of television, especially before going to bed, simply have more trouble falling asleep.

If your young child is afraid to be alone, make the bedroom more friendly. Install a nightlight, or leave the door open and the hall light on. Read relaxing stories together until she's sleepy.

Teenagers need more shuteye but get less. To stay sleepless in study hall, they should follow the above suggestions and

- avoid heavy studying right before going to bed,
- not sleep with TV or computer on, and
- create a dark, quiet bedroom environment early in the evening.

Interesting sleep-related facts

- Some high schools are experimenting with later start times to accommodate teenagers' natural sleep rhythms.
- Frequent sleepwalking, talking while asleep, teeth grinding, or nightmares reduce the quality of a child's sleep and, if present, should be discussed with a medical professional.
- Many physical conditions that interfere with sleep—sleep apnea (breathing stops regularly during sleep), narcolepsy (dozing off repeatedly during the day), restless leg syndrome—can be medically treated.

Kid troubles? Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to see a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members. Call (515) 244-6090 or toll free (800) 327-4692. Counselors are on call 24 hours a day.