

How to Help Kids Manage Sleep, Schoolwork and Screens

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In the aftermath of a huge New England snowstorm, a friend's car got stuck driving down KJ Dell'Antonia's driveway. So she and her four children bundled up and headed out with shovels. After freeing the car once, it slid into a snowbank, and they had to start again as the sun was setting. It was "hard, unpleasant work." Yet after getting the friend safely on her way, one of the children turned to Dell'Antonia and said, "That was fun!"

This story is emblematic of the paradoxes and possibilities of daily family life. In her new book *How to Be a Happier Parent*, Dell'Antonia – the former lead editor of the *New York Times Motherlode* blog – writes about "how to create the best possible family life we can with the hand we've been dealt."



According to her research and lived experience, happier parenting often involves reframing our expectations and approach to the tough spots of family life. From chores to sibling relationships, she recommends first changing how we think about those issues and then change what can be done.

Take family responsibilities. "A kid who has everything done for them begins to see themselves as a *job* for their parents instead of as a joy or a help," said Dell-Antonia. This setup harms kids in at least two ways. It leads to an "an artificial sense of their own importance" while also undercutting the vital role children *could* play in family life.

"Everyone is happier when they are part of a larger community. For kids, the family is that community. When they are part of the day-to-day running of a household, it tells them, 'I'm part of the team, and without me, things don't work as well.' They feel like they are a helpful and necessary part of their family."

Viewing children as inherently capable changes our approach to interacting with them. "They can do things," said Dell'Antonia. "But we mostly don't let them."

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In other words, assume capacity, expect responsibility and keep the lines of communication wide open. This basic approach can help parents and children navigate perennial struggles such as sleep, schoolwork and screens.

Sleep and Teenagers

How do we change how we think about sleep? Abundant research confirms that lack of sleep can have cascading consequences – from poor mental health to emotional reactivity to impaired cognition.

A parent's instinct might be to either attempt to impose sleep rules or take a completely hands-off approach. But a third way, said Dell'Antonia, is engaging teens in the *why* and then letting them manage the *how* for themselves. Instead of focusing on the consequences of sleep deprivation, identify the sleep *benefits* that will be most appealing to your child – from increasing their speed as an athlete to performing better in school. After all, the teenage brain is more motivated by the possibility of pleasure than by the fear of pain. “If you teach your kids why sleep is important and what it can do for them, they can genuinely want and learn to change,” said Dell'Antonia.

Parents can model this mental shift; “Don't talk about it as ‘you *have* to go to sleep’ – it's not a bad place to go! You ‘get to go to sleep.’ In fact, your morning self is begging you to go to sleep right now.”

Making healthy family sleep habits a reality might involve rethinking schedule – or overscheduling. For kids in multiple afterschool activities, after dinner marks the moment “you finally get free of other people telling you what to do,” said Dell'Antonia. “If they are of the mindset that they don't get any free time, some of those afternoon activities might need to go. It might be too much. You can't have better mornings without significant shifts in days and evenings.”

Homework Battles

“In my own research, homework appears among the top four of anecdotally reported stress points for parents,” said Dell'Antonia. “Homework seems to nip away at our feelings of satisfaction as parents,” especially when parents reported getting into regular arguments with their kids about it.

She has a simple message for parents caught up in homework drama: “It's not your homework. It's just not. It's not your job to make sure it gets done. It's not your job to make sure it gets back in the backpack. It's not your job to make sure it gets returned to school. It doesn't matter how it gets done – it's that they learn how to do it themselves.”

This means parents have to take the long view – weeks, months, “even years,” said Dell'Antonia. If you are deeply entwined, you have to take steps to “extract yourself from the process.” For example, instead of editing a child's essay, you could instead let them read it out loud to you so they can hear how it sounds to an audience. You can help them structure time and space to get

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work done – without hovering or micromanaging. If a child really needs more support – but you find yourself in a power struggle – talk to the teacher about options or look for an outside tutor or homework helper.

If family life is not tenable with the current homework pattern, she says to work with your child to shift the responsibility onto their shoulders and tell the teacher “when and if homework gets to you, it will be my *kid’s* work.”

Screen Time Dilemmas

“Screen time is tough,” said Dell’Antonia. “Life is totally different for our kids than it was for us. We can accept that it is scary and hard for all of us.”

The goal “is not to prevent your kids from using any technology in your house, but teaching them how to manage it *out* of your house.” After all, no one wants to “send a kid out in the world who is just going to play Fortnite until they run out of food and money!”

In her research, happier families have an ongoing family dialogue about their family’s values and how screens fit into that. And that means adults – not just tweens and teens -- are seeking to build and model healthier screen habits.

Once you have a shared vision, there are still details to work out. In her book, Dell’Antonia offers some questions you can use to start a discussion with teens -- whether at the dinner table or in the car. These include:

- How much screen time would you consider reasonable on a school night?
- Do you want to consume, or do you want to create?
- When is the latest you think you should be sending or receiving a text?
- Is it hard for you not to look at your phone while you do homework? What would help?
- What are some things you like to do on the weekend? How much of that time do you want to spend on watching things or playing video games?
- What will you do if you get a text that’s scary or sexy or otherwise worries you?
- When your friends are angry with one another, how do you see them using their online connection? How will you use yours?
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What does a good parent-child conversation about digital habits look like? “It looks casual. It looks like listening. It doesn’t look like a checklist,” said Dell’Antonia. “Talk about a celebrity who did something stupid on Twitter. That’s an opening! Take every single opening to have a conversation. How does it make you feel when you see a picture of a party you are not invited to? What’s the problem with sending nude pictures? Teens are aware of this stuff. Find a way to make yourself a part of *their* conversation. If you’re slamming down rules that do not match their needs and understandings, you aren’t in it with them – you are making it all harder.”

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Embracing the Happiness of Raising Teens

Parents of younger children often worried about how they will navigate the teen years, and how this will affect family happiness. Remember, said Dell'Antonia, "She is not going to turn into a different kid on her 13th birthday. This is still your child. There are still going to be great moments and bad moments. Bigger consequences, bigger relationships, bigger connections. I will have three teenagers this fall. It's great, and in some ways, better."

It's not always easy to parent a teenager – but then, it's not always easy to *be* a teenager. So when they are cranky in the morning or don't finish their homework, "you don't need to make it worse," said Dell'Antonia. "When your kids are having a bad morning, you don't need to chime in. They know they will be late to school. They know they will face external consequences. You can go with silence, you can go with positivity, but you don't need to pile on to them ... and you don't need to soak [their upsetness] into you." At an age when they may want to pull away, let them know, in big and small ways, that they are an indispensable part of the family: "Our kids really thrive when they feel needed, when they feel important."