

The secret weapon for school success



Is your child having behavior problems and trouble in school? Making sure she gets enough sleep may be the solution.

Lack of sleep is a national epidemic for today's children, and the consequences are serious.

Sleep deprivation can affect cognitive skills and academic achievement. A continuing lack of sleep is linked to serious health problems including diabetes, obesity, heart disease, depression, and a shortened life span.

Why aren't kids getting enough sleep?

Children ages 6 to 13 need about 9 to 11 hours of sleep, according to the [National Sleep Foundation](#). Yet studies show that most kids are getting about an hour less sleep each night than they did 30 years ago.

Why? Extracurricular activities, such as sports teams and arts programs, may schedule events at night. Working parents who get home late may feel guilty and want to spend time with their children in the evening. Too much homework and the many distractions of television, video games, and computers all play a role. In addition, all the pressures and stresses of today's frenetic lifestyles may make it difficult for kids to calm down so they can fall asleep.

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Catching up on sleep is not a good option

Parents may think they'll let their children catch up on sleep on the weekend. But sleep experts at the Mayo Clinic advise against this practice as irregular sleep schedules can affect the biological clock, hurt the quality of sleep and cause greater irritability. Children who sleep in on the weekend may have an even harder time getting up for school on Monday morning, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. It's better, the experts say, to keep similar schedules during the week and on the weekends.

Make sleep a priority

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, teacher, parent educator, and author of *Sleepless in America*, says parents can play a key role by placing a high value on their children's sleep. She says the first step for parents is to "make sleep a priority."

"Scientific research links heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity with lack of sleep. There's also a study out of the University of Michigan," adds Kurcinka, "that shows that 20 to 25 % of kids with ADHD have sleep disorders. Sleep is not a luxury. This is about health and well-being."

Some parents may think that their child isn't sleeping much because he just doesn't need as much sleep as other children. But Kurcinka doesn't buy that argument. She says, "When I hear a parent say, 'He is a kid who doesn't need sleep,' generally this means he is a kid who can't sleep. He needs help learning to calm himself to get to sleep. If I see a child who has behavior problems, can't focus or pay attention, a child who's getting sick a lot, craving carbohydrates, I'll want to look at how much sleep he's getting. Maybe the child is just exhausted."

Lack of sleep is linked to a multitude of problems

Several studies presented at Sleep 2007, the annual meeting of the Associated Professional Sleep Societies, highlighted some of the adverse effects caused by lack of sleep — aggressive behavior and bullying, poor grades, poor attention span, disruptions in cognitive and linguistic function including the skills necessary for reading and language development. A few scientists theorize that sleep problems at a young age can cause permanent changes in a child's brain structure.

Lack of sleep may be the cause of behavior problems

Sometimes lack of sleep will be the reason behind temper tantrums, morning meltdowns and irritable behavior. Your child may not be able to tell you that's the

problem and you may not see it because a tired child may become a wired child-full of energy. “It’s as though their body is out of control,” says Kurcinka. “And it is.”

Kurcinka says parents need to set limits on extracurricular activities and computer time, and become advocates at their school for reducing the amount of homework, and encouraging schools to adopt later start times.

More and more children lack sleep — a disturbing trend

Kurcinka argues that lack of sleep among children is more common now than ever before and attributes this trend to three factors: science, safety, and achievement.

“Science — The research on early brain development and the importance of brain stimulation has meant kids are overstimulated starting at a young age. They begin by watching ‘Baby Einstein’ videos and continue from there. Safety-parents are afraid to let kids go out and play so they provide more structured activities which tend to be organized around adult hours and schedules. Achievement-so much is competitive and overly achievement oriented for kids, from soccer to gymnastics to academics.”

To counter these factors, Kurcinka says, parents should “create an environment that values sleep and is conducive to it. The bottom line is that parents of children who are successful have a secret weapon — they protect their kids’ sleep. Kids who get more sleep have higher grade-point averages. In a study reported in the journal, *Child Development*, in 2003 entitled ‘The Effects of Sleep Restriction and Extension on School-Age Children: What a Difference an Hour Makes,’ Tel Aviv University researcher Avi Sadeh found that even 41 minutes less sleep each night can affect memory and attention.”

Managing sleep patterns begins in the morning

Kurcinka says managing sleep problems and controlling stress levels begins in the morning by making time for a peaceful family breakfast. She sees it as a way to take time to sit and talk, to “check in” and connect with your child. By starting the day without rushing, you set a calm tone for the rest of the day.

Avoiding bedtime battles

To avoid bedtime battles at night, Kurcinka advocates establishing a calming, predictable bedtime routine attuned to your child’s needs that will help her wind down. In her book, *Sleepless in America*, she compares the process of getting your child to bed to landing a jumbo jet:

“Landing a jumbo jet is not a simple process. Miles from their destination, the pilots begin to prepare. They check the weather, determine which runway to utilize, the level of instrumentation to use on approach as well as the optimal speed. Once those decisions are made, they start to configure the aircraft appropriately...What the crew is trained to know is that conscientious preparation and a gradual descent lead to a soft landing and satisfied customers. When it comes to bedtime, most children are like those jumbo jets. Their days are often spent ‘flying’ from one activity to another, and they need to gradually ‘glide’ from the ‘high’ of their day to a ‘soft landing’ in bed.”

Spending 20 minutes with your child before bedtime in a soothing activity, such as reading, quietly catching up on the day’s activities, or telling stories, can help provide the calm that will help your child transition to going to sleep. Adjusting the routine, depending on your child’s mood and needs, (just as the pilot adjusts the plane’s landing pattern depending on the weather) will help, too. Some days kids just need a little more connection and attention.

Seven ways to be your child’s sleep advocate

- **Talk to your child about sleep.** Have a conversation with your child about the importance of sleep. “Educate your child about how much sleep he needs and how it will affect his performance,” advises Kurcinka. “If he wants to do well in his soccer game, or on a test, make him aware that he will do better if he gets more sleep.”
- **Encourage your child to establish a sleep routine.** Encourage your child to stick to a regular sleep schedule. School-age children need an average of 10 to 11 hours of sleep each night. Insist on a regular bedtime and wake-up time. Have a regular quiet, relaxing bedtime routine such as reading to your child or reading together to help him slow down before going to sleep.
- **Say no to late-night TV and computer use.** Keep the computer and TV out of your child’s bedroom. It’s a good way to monitor his screen activities and make sure he doesn’t stay up past his bedtime. If he insists on watching TV right before bedtime, you can tell him to start getting ready for bed during the commercials and to record “must-see” late-night shows and watch them at another time.
- **Check in with your child’s teacher.** Ask your child’s teacher if your child is alert or sleepy in class. If he is frequently sleepy in class, that’s a sign that you need to help him get more sleep.
- **The pros and cons of naps.** A short nap after school (no more than 30 minutes) may be refreshing, but don’t let your school-age child sleep for hours during the day as this will throw off her natural sleep schedule. It may be a stretch to

convince your school to provide a time for naps, but it is done in Japan. Schools there encourage “power naps” at lunchtime, when students put their heads down on their desk for 20 to 30 minutes.

- **Exercise plays a role in keeping a regular sleep schedule.** “Exercise is very important, particularly getting outside and getting morning light,” says Kurcinka. “But exercise raises the body temperature so it is not a good idea to exercise right before going to sleep. That means it’s important to regulate organized soccer and baseball games so they are not scheduled too late into the evening.”
- **Be a role model.** Show your child that you make sleep a priority in your own life. Children are more likely to follow your advice if you follow the same rules for yourself.