

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Sleeping beauties

Helping kids get the right amount of quality sleep will reap manifold rewards when it comes to their development and general wellbeing, writes Karen Fontaine.

Article contributed by Karen Fontaine

Whoever coined the term 'sleeping like a baby' had obviously never lived with one. Infants' sleep patterns are notoriously erratic, and as they grow up the story remains much the same. Preschoolers kick up about napping during the day, school-aged children want to stay up late at night and teenagers refuse to get out of bed in the morning.

One thing remains the same: sleep is critically important for children, but Australians are getting about half an hour less sleep per night than they did 30 years ago, according to a study by the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research.

Kids are going to bed later because it's now the norm for both parents to work full-time, meaning that evenings are often the only opportunity for family time. In addition, the intrusion into bedrooms of digital media such as mobile phones, laptops and iPods means children are getting less shut-eye – with far-reaching consequences.

"With disturbed sleep, you pretty well see changes in everything, from the cardiovascular system through to the skin," says Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research. "You can go without food for a week or so but you cannot go without sleep."

As Dr Lushington says, sleep is important for memory, "so if you want to remember things and to forget things – which is equally important – you have to sleep".

"We also know from animal studies that sleep state seems to be incredibly important for the optimal wiring up of the brain," he says. "In infants and kids, sleep plays an important role in the optimal development of the brain. Sleep is also important for growth, and for those who don't get enough there is a failure to thrive. Sleep plays an important role in the immune system and it also anchors the circadian body clock system."

Most parents realise the importance of sleep, Dr Lushington says. However, "what many don't appreciate is how important structure, namely a routine, really is".

"Our research shows that in terms of kids being able to cope with school and life and not having any problematic behaviours, it's not so much how long they sleep – what's important is a regular schedule," he says.

"Kids who go to bed at different times and wake up at different times with big swings on weekdays compared to weekends – those are the kids who tend to get into trouble. Sober habits are very important."

There is no such thing as a sleep bank – meaning that even if a child had 12 hours sleep last night, they won't get away with just eight hours tonight. Parents need to stick to a routine, make evenings as predictable as possible, and enforce hard-and-fast rules, particularly for teenagers, about digital media in the bedroom.

"The teen years are a period of life where it's to be expected that you will hand over control to them; learning their own limits is part of the journey," says Dr Lushington. "And, being young and healthy, they can sometimes stay up all night and be fine the next day. What you can do is help them see the connection between how they're sleeping – and how they feel during the day."



How much is enough?

To ensure your child gets the optimum amount of sleep, use the following as a guideline, says Dr Kurt Lushington, head of the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research:

Children aged 2-5	11-12 hours per night
Children aged 6-12	9-11 hours per night
Teenagers	8-10 hours per night

And adhere to these rules, advises Dr Lushington:

- ▶ "On the weekends, don't let kids stay up more than an hour or two later than they normally do, and don't let them sleep in more than an hour or two later than normal."
- ▶ "Give them time to unwind before they turn out the lights and don't let them fall asleep in front of the TV. There has to be a routine for falling asleep – otherwise what happens is that unless the light or the TV is on, kids can't fall asleep – which is crazy."
- ▶ "Exercise, big meals and hot baths are not a good idea directly before they go to bed."
- ▶ "Keep track of how they are during the day. If they look like they're not coping or if they're irritable, it might be that they need more sleep."