

Establishing Healthy Sleep Patterns Can Affect Your Teen's Mental Health

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Teenagers often complain—or simply display by their behavior—that they did not get enough sleep the previous night. But, according to the National Sleep Foundation, “sleep is food for the brain.” No sleep or a lack of enough sleep can cause disturbances to a person’s overall functioning at home and work, and “overall functioning” includes your child’s or your teen’s mood.

How much sleep should a child or teen receive each night? Recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that preschoolers should get 11 to 12 hours, elementary school students should get a minimum of 10 hours, and teenagers should get between 9 and 10 hours of sleep each night.

The National Sleep Foundation noted that only approximately 15% to 20% of teenagers get the recommended amount of sleep each night. This means that approximately *80% to 85% of teens are not getting enough sleep*, and not getting enough sleep can lead to having a limited ability to listen, concentrate, and solve problems in the academic setting.



How can parents help?

Helping your child or teen get a healthy night’s sleep can take some planning. It also might require that you to learn to coach your child about the importance of healthy sleep tactics. Having some insights about sleep and sleep research can be useful. For example:

- **Napping.** One controversial subject among specialists in sleep research is napping. Some say that napping for too long or at a time too close to bedtime can disturb a person’s nighttime REM cycles. However, others acknowledge that napping can provide benefits throughout the day, such as increasing a teen’s or child’s level of alertness and decreasing their levels of anxiety and stress. Some researchers suggest that naps should only last approximately 10 minutes, and others suggest that naps should last 20 to 30 minutes. Despite the fact that napping can be beneficial, teens should never use napping as a way to replace a full night of sleep.
- **Sticking to a bedtime.** It is important to find a sleep schedule that works for your family and then stick with it. Having a bedtime routine helps a child’s and a teen’s body adjust to his or her sleep cycle. Teens should try to go to bed at a similar time each night, even on the weekends. For

most teenagers, this can be tough because weekends usually include participating in or attending social and sporting events, and these activities can change the time a person goes to bed by a few hours or more. But having a drastic shift in bedtimes during the weekend can disrupt the important sleeping patterns that are set during the week.

- **Settling down for sleep.** Having a cool, dark and comfortable sleeping environment is optimal for getting a good night's rest. Also, taking time to wind down can be helpful. One common mistake that leads to sleep disruption is overstimulation right before bed, which can make it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep. Overstimulation can include eating, drinking, and exercise—so it might be a good idea to avoid all of these activities in the few hours before bedtime. More importantly, in the hour just before sleeping, kids should avoid watching television or using gaming systems, cellphones, or tablets to begin to rest the body and the brain. What should your child do instead? Some suggest that writing in a journal or reading before bed can be calming.

Does sleep affect mental health?

There is some truth to the saying that you can “wake up on the wrong side of the bed.” Not getting enough sleep can have a drastic effect on a teen's mental health. In 2006, the National Sleep Foundation conducted a poll among teenagers about the effects of not getting enough sleep. The study results showed that “many adolescents exhibit symptoms of a depressed mood on a frequent if not daily basis” (National Sleep Foundation, 2016). The teens who were followed in this study said that when they did not get the recommended amount of sleep, they felt unhappy, sad, depressed, and hopeless about the future, and some felt nervous and tense.

Is sleep a battle worth fighting with your teen?

Parents often must “pick their battles.” While sleep might not seem like a battle that is among the most important, when you consider the long-term benefits of establishing healthy sleep habits, it might be worth a clash now and then. It's no surprise that for the average teenager, sleep is not going to top the list of priorities. But because sleep is so important, it is essential that parents educate their children and teens about how to form healthy sleeping habits, reinforce the benefits of making and sticking to a sleeping plan, and encourage their teens to make sleep a priority.

Sources Consulted

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sleep and Sleep Disorders.

<http://www.cdc.gov/sleep/index.html>. Accessed March 30, 2016.

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