

Is My Child (or Teen) Getting Enough Sleep?



It's not an unfamiliar refrain: "But I'm not tired!" It's heard from toddlers and pre-schoolers who refuse to nap, and from school-age kids who seem wide-awake at ten or eleven o'clock. It's also a favorite of teenagers, who insist that they do just fine on one or two hours of shut-eye. Well, it's true that different bodies need different amounts of sleep, young bodies included. But a recent study by the National Sleep Foundation (www.sleepfoundation.org) showed that 69% of American children aren't getting enough sleep, period. Here are some tips on getting kids to snooze, no matter how old they are.

How Much Is Enough?

With a baby in the house, sleep is a big priority. After all, if the baby doesn't sleep, no one does, right? Things get easier after babies start sleeping through the night; without much urging, most infants get the 14-15 hours of sleep they need a day. Once babies turn into toddlers, however—with minds of their own where sleep isn't on the agenda—it's a different story. The resulting struggles have worn down many a parent, and run down many a kid.

The amount of sleep children and teens *really* need may surprise you:

- Toddlers should get 12-15 hours of sleep per day, including one nap.
- Pre-schoolers and kindergartners, without napping, need 11-13 hours of sleep a night.
- Older school-age children need 10-11 hours of sleep, generally through fifth grade.
- Teenagers should get at least 8½ hours of sleep; many need over 9!

How Can I Tell if My Child Needs More Sleep?

Often, the signs that a kid's tired are pretty obvious, even when accompanied by energetic resistance. Indeed, "hyper" behavior at bedtime usually means someone's overtired. Other signs which point to a lack of sleep, including indicators of sleep disorders, include:

- If your child continually falls asleep while riding in the car.
- If you have to wake your child up every morning.
- If your child has continuing difficulties falling asleep, and staying asleep during the night.
- If your child snores loudly, appears to have difficulty breathing or gasps for breath while asleep.

- If your child is irritable or cranky during the day, or has behavioral problems. According to surveys, parents of children who didn't get enough sleep were twice as likely to be contacted by school officials about their child's behavior. And overall tiredness can create mood swings in older children and teens.
- If your child or teen often falls asleep at school.
- If teachers complain that your child or teen performs poorly at school, or has difficulties focusing and remembering things—many times sleepiness can be mistaken for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- If your teen needs several alarms to get up in the morning, or continually oversleeps.

How Do I Teach Good Sleep Habits?

Research shows that nearly 70% of children under the age of 10 experience some sort of sleep disorders, including insomnia, nightmares, sleep-walking and sleep apnea. Problems may begin when kids start asserting their independence, and resisting naps and bedtime. The good news is that parents can recognize the signs early, and teach toddlers healthy sleep habits which will last a lifetime.

To help a toddler become a good sleeper:

- Pick a set bedtime (7:30 or 8 p.m. for pre-schoolers) and establish a bedtime routine which includes a bath, reading, etc. Give yourselves 30-45 minutes total, including 15-30 minutes of relaxing and quiet activities.
- Try to put your child to bed when drowsy; it's good if toddlers can learn to fall asleep independently.

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Is My Child (or Teen) Getting Enough Sleep? (Continued)

- Give your toddler choices—what pajamas, what book, what song, etc.—but limit the options to two or three; questions like “Do you want to go to bed now?” won’t get you closer to your goal.
 - Train yourself to set limits and make it part of the routine: if you hear “One more!” every night, anticipate it and see that it’s *only* one more, whether it’s a story or song or glass of water.
 - Make sure your child’s bedroom is cozy, comfortable and a consistent environment, night after night.
 - The transition from crib to “big kid bed” can be helped along with lots and lots of praise as well as persistence: at first, kids may keep getting out of bed just because they can.
 - If your child still sleeps in the “family bed,” start the move to the kid’s own bed gradually, and use a favorite doll, blanket or stuffed animal as a comfort object for security. But think about one change at a time: if your toddler is toilet-training or starting pre-school, allow time for adjustment.
 - Contact a doctor if you are concerned about specific sleep problems.
- Be consistent about bedtimes and limits: don’t give into “Five more minutes, *please!*” This is especially true as demands on a child’s time increase because of activities and homework.
 - Keep the TV and computers out of the bedroom!
 - Avoid TV, videogames, etc. just before bed; TV at night has been linked to bedtime resistance, difficulty falling asleep and nighttime anxiety.
 - Avoid caffeine in food and sodas.
 - Take note of how much sleep seems to work for your child, with a lookout for cranky behavior during the day and overtiredness at night. Make sure your child is rested, and remember that needs will change as kids get older.
 - If you notice signs of sleep disorders or daytime sleepiness, don’t hesitate to contact a doctor.

And for Parents of Teens...

- Let them figure out when they need to go to bed and get up in order to be on top of their game; calculations should include 8½ hours of sleep.
- Encourage bright morning light—it wakes up the brain—but keep things dark in the evening.
- Help teens get in touch with their individual sleep rhythms; see if they can schedule active classes or labs during their internal “downtimes.”
- Teens should avoid caffeine after lunch.
- Introduce your teen to catnaps. Early afternoon naps of less than an hour are a great pick-up before work, homework or an evening out.
- Emphasize that relaxation should come before hitting the sack. It shouldn’t be “work ‘til you drop,” with intense studying, reading or the Internet right up to bedtime. Also, dozing off with the TV on can significantly upset restful sleep.
- Learn to recognize signs of sleep-deprivation, and push your teen to be self-aware, as well.
- Don’t let teens drive tired! Drowsy drivers—most of them under 30—are responsible for over 100,000 automobile crashes every year.

What Do I Do As My Child Gets Older?

Kindergarteners and bedtime battles are an age-old story, partly because children often decide that naps should be a thing of the past. Other reasons kids fight going to sleep can be insecurity, fears and even nightmares—a kindergartener’s world is filled with strange new things and unfamiliar people. Parents can help by keeping an eye on disruptions to sleep patterns. And it’s much easier for school-age kids to keep up good sleep habits if the entire family makes getting enough sleep a real priority.

Things to remember as kids start school include:

- Make “checking in” part of the bedtime routine. Ask about your child’s day—the good, the bad and the ugly—and allow your kid time to share any worries.

This material is for individual assistance only. It is not intended to provide any reader with specific authority, advice or recommendations. If and when you determine it is necessary, please seek advice regarding your particular situation from the appropriate professional.