

## How to Help Your Child Get the Sleep They Need



*By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT*

Sleep is essential for health and daily functioning. It's as important as a healthy diet and regular physical activity. At all stages of life, the brain is active during sleep -- consolidating memories, processing emotions, refreshing cells, and clearing out build-up of waste materials that can slow or damage brain function.

In adolescence, the brain is still developing, and sleep is essential to healthy brain development. The brain's prefrontal cortex -- the part responsible for complex thinking, decision-making, and emotional regulation -- is among the last areas of the brain to develop and undergoes significant maturation during the teenage years. This part of the brain is especially sensitive to the effects of sleep deprivation.

Yet according to research, many children are not getting the sleep they need, and as little as 15% of teens do.

The recommended amount of sleep for children three to five years old is 11-13 hours a day, including any naps; for six to 12-year-old it's 10-11 hours a night; and for teenagers, it's 8-10 hours a night. And even an average of just one to two hours of sleep deprivation a night can wreak havoc on a child's mental and physical health.

### **Sleep Deprivation's Effects**

If your child has a sleep debt, they need two or three good night's sleeps to be at a fully rested state again. Sleep deprivation impacts many areas of life:

- **Mood**, causing teenagers to be irritable, impatient, and easily upset.
- **Behavior**, making teens more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior such as drinking, driving overly fast, and other dangerous activities.
- **Cognitive ability**, resulting in problems with attention, memory, decision-making, reaction time, and creativity.
- **Mental health**, particularly depression, bipolar, anxiety, and ADHD.
- **Academic performance**, causing poor grades, sleeping in school, and increased tardiness or absences.
- **Driving**, as teenagers are at the highest risk for falling asleep at the wheel.

### **Tips to Help Children Get Enough Sleep**

There are several things you can do to help your child get the right amount of sleep.

- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule.** Teenagers should go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day. Sleep schedules for teens should also ensure adequate time in bed.
- **Try to have your child get up the first time their alarm goes off.** Any extra sleep, including from snoozing the alarm, is more harmful than beneficial. When a sleep cycle is interrupted, the body feels groggy and tired throughout the day.
- **Avoid oversleeping on weekends.** Although catching up on some sleep on the weekends can be helpful, sleeping in until noon on Sunday will make it hard for teenagers to get back on a school schedule that night.

- **Take early afternoon naps.** A nap of 15-20 minutes in the early afternoon can be beneficial.
- **Avoid caffeine, smoking, alcohol, and drugs.** All of these can cause sleep problems.
- **Making bedrooms tech-free.** Have a central charging area in the home and limit the use of electronics in the 30-60 minutes before sleep. Exposure to the blue light from devices can delay the release of melatonin and push back sleep. Furthermore, mental stimulation can keep teens' minds active and alert, making it harder to get to sleep and get a good night's rest. Keeping the bedroom, and especially the bed itself, tech-free helps the body associate it with sleep.
- **Keep bedrooms cool.** This creates an environment that promotes sleep.
- **Avoid certain activities** bedtime snacks with caffeine or refined sugars, pets sleeping with people, and stressful conversations before bed.
- **Contact your teen's doctor** if there is excessive snoring, sleep apnea (pauses in breathing or very shallow breathing), or your teen is continually drowsy despite changes towards healthy sleep habits.

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