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Sleep tips for kids

• WELLBEING

by Michael Grose

Regularity and routine are the agents of sleep. It takes discipline to adhere to and commitment to making sleep a high priority. Helping kids understand how their body clock works, assisting them to work out their optimal bedtime and putting lifestyle habits in place can help them get the sleep they need to maximise their learning, wellbeing, development and overall performance. Here are some tips to help:

Understand the body clock

Sleep is regulated by a 24-hour body clock that manages the secretion of melatonin to send us to sleep and cortisol to wake us up. This amazing body clock is reset every day when light first hits our retinas. Sleep in late and the clock goes out of synch. When your child works with the rhythms of their body's 24-hour clock they will give themselves the optimal chance for sleep success.

The sleep-wake cycle for teenagers is delayed by up to two hours. That is, they are sleepy later and awake later than when they were children. Melatonin, which makes them sleepy, is secreted as late as 11.00pm for some young people, which makes the time before bed-time a sleepless zone. Cortisol, the chemical that wakes them up is released at close to 8.00am for many teens. If this is the case, your young person's brain wants to be asleep when they need to be awake for school.

Stick to sleep recommendations

The Raising Children's Network recommends between 11-13 hours sleep per night for young children, 10-11 hours for primary school children and 8-10 hours for secondary school-aged kids. As every child is different, you may notice that your child needs more or less sleep than is recommended.

Develop good sleep hygiene habits

- Start a regular bedtime routine at least 45 minutes out from bedtime to help kids get ready for sleep.
- Eat and exercise at the right time. Sleep likes a relaxed body and a calm nervous system, so schedule exercise and active movement before mealtimes.
- Create a sleep sanctuary. Restrict bedrooms to sleep and relaxation quarters and find other places in the house for time out and reflection, school work and active play.
- Keep bedrooms cave-like. A child's bedroom should be cave-like – that is, dark, cool and free from electronic devices. Darkness encourages melatonin, which regulates sleep-wake patterns.

- Get up at a regular time. For optimal sleep, bed and wake up times need to be as regular as possible.

Lifestyle habits that promote sleep

- Teach your child or young person to put away digital devices at least ninety minutes before bed-time
- Minimise weekend sleep-ins and limit them to an hour more than usual, to keep the sleep clock operating on a regular basis
- Encourage your child to go outside every day – take a walk, meet a mate (subject to COVID restrictions) or do an errand
- Keep homework out of bedrooms, or at least out of beds. The brain associates activity with location, so if kids work while on their beds, it will be hard for them to mentally switch off from their schoolwork when the light finally goes out.
- Confine caffeine to mornings. Consuming caffeine in any form close to bedtime is like throwing a wrecking ball through regular sleep patterns. The brain needs to calm down rather than be artificially stimulated if sleep is to occur.

Sleep is a critical component of enhancing a child's wellbeing, learning, development and overall performance. Helping your child to get enough quality sleep will ensure that their brain and body are being used at full capacity.