

# HELPING KIDS AND TEENS TO GET THE SLEEP THEY NEED

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Most parents put enormous time and energy into getting their babies to sleep well. They read books about infant sleep and talk to other parents about it. They take positions in ongoing controversies about infant sleep approaches. But parents' attention to sleep as a health concern and developmental necessity drops off dramatically as children age. As infants and toddlers become preschoolers or school aged kids, extra-curricular, family, and school activities take on ever increasing importance. With so many things to do and see, life becomes busy and parents are less and less likely to supervise bedtime and to protect sleep time.



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Sleep experts agree that, in terms of parenting priorities, physical and emotional health needs to be at the top of the list. School should be second, and everything else should come farther down the list. Once parents understand that their kids' health, academics, mood, behaviour, and sports suffer as a result of not getting enough sleep, they should become very motivated to protect their child's sleep. The choice between, say, playing hockey and getting sleep, becomes much easier. So, as you organize day to day activities, keep a few things in mind:

- Limit television Remove televisions, video games, and computers from bedrooms. Keep these in public areas.
- Except for small children, avoid napping during the day. Napping disturbs the normal pattern of sleep and wakefulness.
- Exercise promotes good sleep, but vigorous exercise should be taken in the morning or afternoon. In the evening, relaxing exercise is best, as it is less likely to increase body temperature and interfere with sleep.
- Especially in winter, be sure children get enough exposure to natural light. This helps maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle.
- Try to avoid emotionally upsetting talks or activities before bed. Don't bring daytime stresses to bed.
- Ask yourself whether your child has more trouble sleeping after eating certain foods. If so, try removing these for a while.
- Ask your child's physician whether any prescribed medicines can interfere with your child's sleep. Ask whether there are alternatives to the medicine currently used.
- Set a regular time for bed each night and stick to it. If the current bedtime is much too late, set it 10 minutes earlier each day or every couple of days.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine, including a warm bath and reading stories.
- Make after-dinner playtime relaxing.
- Too much activity close to bedtime can get in the way of sleep.
- The bed is for sleeping. Don't send your child to bed for time outs.
- Avoid giving children large meals close to bedtime.
- As for bedtime, parents should dictate and not negotiate.
- Avoid anything with caffeine (chocolate, soft drinks) less than six hours before bedtime.
- Keep bedroom temperatures comfortable—neither too warm nor too cold.
- Keep the bedroom dark. At most, leave on a small nightlight.
- Keep noise levels low.
- Remember that pretty much everything you do to improve sleep benefits health generally, by reducing negative stress, and optimizing daytime functioning, mood and health.
- If sleep problems persist for you or your child, and especially if sleepiness gets in the way of concentration during regular daily routines, consider discussing things with your Family Physician, Pediatrician, or Psychologist. □

