

SLEEP AND YOUR UNDER 5...



Sleep plays a crucial role in the development of young minds. In addition to having a direct effect on happiness, research shows that sleep impacts alertness and attention, cognitive performance, mood, resiliency, vocabulary acquisition, learning and memory. Sleep also has important effects on growth, especially in the early years.

IN THIS RESOURCE:

- How much sleep does your child need?
- What happens if your child doesn't sleep well?
- When is it time to seek professional help?
- Ways you can support good sleep for your child

HOW MUCH SLEEP DOES YOUR CHILD NEED?

There are many guidelines around to help parents / caregivers gauge how much their child should be sleeping. When considering the times below, remember that children can vary an hour, (more or less) and sleep can change day to day. With babies, sleep is not linear. All may be going well until a change happens such as catching a cold, or a new developmental milestone and this may interfere with sleep. Temperament also plays a part, a baby or child who likes a set routine and likes their own bed has different needs to those who can sleep anywhere. Each child is different and parents / caregivers will benefit by thinking about their individual child's needs. Try not to compare your children with others.

AVERAGE HOURS CHILDREN NEED (guide only):

- From birth to 12 months - approximately 17 hours reducing to 14/13 hours
- From 24 months - 13 hours including naps
- From 3 years of age to 6 years of age - 12 hours reducing to 10 hours
- From 13 years - sleep reduces to approximately 8 - 9 hours
- From 13 years to 18 years - 8 - 9 hours, a shift happens here with teenagers not sleeping until later at night and waking later.



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHILDREN DON'T SLEEP WELL?

We all can suffer with grumpiness, low mood, feeling unwell and may find it hard to concentrate or cope with our daily activities when we have not slept well.

Children are the same. In fact, our cells need to rejuvenate while we sleep. Children's growth hormones and chemicals are released and short-term memory is converted to long term memory while sleeping.

If children are not sleeping well, it may impact their learning. Concentration is reduced and behaviour can become quite anti-social and aggressive. Their general well-being becomes compromised. In a nutshell, sleep is essential for a happy child and parents. The occasional bad night we can cope with but being constantly disturbed at night can have an impact on everybody.

SEE YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU NOTICE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

- If your child snores or is extremely snuffy, (listen during the night). Some children have large adenoids and tonsils and this will interfere with their sleep
- If your child is overly sweaty and difficult to wake up
- If they have difficulty sleeping on their back and can only breathe through their mouth

Note: never given melatonin to children, only with a Doctor's advice.

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WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT SLEEP FOR YOUR CHILD.

First ensure children have plenty of active play and spend time outdoors. Natural light helps with serotonin production which converts to the sleep hormone, melatonin. Read about circadian rhythms and how this influences sleep.

It's important children have a good diet. Low iron can make it difficult for children to sleep and not enough protein can cause disturbed sleep. Serotonin rich foods which are also high in protein such as eggs, chicken, nuts and seeds are great but to reduce choking risk for young children, put them in a smoothie. Investigate how foods influence sleep, it's quite fascinating.

Make sure you play peaceful games before bedtime, not overstimulating or physical ones to wind your child up. Make sure your bedtime hour is realistic. For young children around 7pm is a good time to sleep as this may fit with their circadian rhythm. This may mean a longer bedtime wind down routine, starting at 6.30pm. Late to bed can mean a tired and wired child who will not be able to sleep. Make sure your child's room is not too hot or cold and have breathable and safe bedding. Ensure their bedroom is at least 80% dark to help the sleep hormone melatonin be released.

Keep children off devices or any technology as the light emitted by TV and computers, inhibits the sleep hormone, melatonin. Make the room darker before bedtime. White or blue lights also stop melatonin release, so try to dim down or use special night lights. Amber, orange or red lights let melatonin release.

Have a regular routine each night so children feel secure and anticipate the schedule. Baths or showers at night relaxes the body and induce better sleep. Massages after a bath/shower are a lovely way to relax the body too.

It's soothing to read books with a soft lamp/ light in their room, so your child can enjoy special time with you. Our lives can be too busy and our children will sometimes make bed-time difficult if they haven't had enough time with you. Keep night routines calm and predictable. Children often love the same book read every night. This may be boring to parents but it's important for children to predict, anticipate and enjoy the familiar story. It calms them. Parents need to be relaxed and calm at bedtime so children can be too.

If your child won't settle, wakes constantly and calls out or continually comes to your bed, then you need a plan. There are numerous strategies such as spaced soothing and silent returns, (many strategies have different names). Investigate what will work for you. Ask for advice if you need it.

Don't belittle bad dreams with your child, they feel so real and you will not convince them they're not. There are some great ideas such as making a monster spray or using a night light. Use books that show little people overcoming big things, such as, "Where the Wild Things Are".

Some children have night terrors where they don't seem to wake up while they are very upset. This can be extremely unsettling for parents to witness and may happen if children are overtired or recuperating



BABIES

This is a more specialised area. There is free advice online or books that can be very helpful. Discuss any concerns with your G.P. or specialist. Often, parents need support when working on a sleep plan for their baby.

REFERENCES:

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/children-and-sleep>
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