

Sleep in Children and Youth: Information for Caregivers



Image credit: Adobe Stock

Summary: Sleep is critical for physical and mental health, but many youth just don't get enough. Lack of sleep can cause a number of health problems. On the other hand, trouble sleeping can also be a symptom of physical or mental health problems. This fact sheet will help you make sure your teen is getting a good night's sleep.

How Does Sleep Usually Happen?

The brain has an internal clock that tells us when we need to sleep. When it becomes dark outside in the evening, this clock is triggered to make melatonin. Melatonin is a brain chemical that makes us feel sleepy.

When youth reach adolescence, their sleep pattern changes. Their inner clocks shift, making them want to stay up later and sleep later the next morning. This can be difficult if they have an early school start time. Even so, try to accommodate this as far as possible.

How Much Sleep Does My Child/Youth Need?

| Age of Child (in Years) | Amount of Sleep Needed |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Preschoolers (aged 3-5 years) | Usually 10-13 hrs, but may range 9-16 hrs depending on the child |
| School-aged children (aged 6-13) | Usually 9-11 hrs, but may range 7-12 hrs depending on the child |
| Adolescent / teen (aged 14-17) | Usually 8-10 hrs, but may range 7-11 hrs depending on the teen |
| Young adult (aged 18-25) | Usually 7-9 hrs, but may range from 6-11 hrs, depending on the person |

What Happens When You Don't Get Enough Sleep?

All sorts of problems can happen when children/youth don't get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can cause:

- Mood problems (like irritability);
- Trouble concentrating;
- Hyperactivity. While adults usually feel tired and don't have much energy when sleep deprived, youth can become hyperactive.
- Physical health problems (like getting sick more often).

As a result, sometimes children and youth appear to have depression, anxiety, or even attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but the real issue is that they have a sleep problem.

How Can I Make Sure My Child/Youth Gets Enough Sleep?

Humans are a social species, and so it helps to first make sure that your child feels safe in his/her relationship with you. When there are problems in our relationships, we do not feel safe, and this can make sleep more difficult.

Younger children have a strong need to be close to a parent, especially at bedtime. This may be the result of how humans have evolved over time. Thousands of years ago, sleep and separation from parents could mean danger from predators. Being with parents meant safety. As children grow older, they still need this connection to parents, but this gradually changes into a need to be emotionally attached.

This need for physical closeness can return, though, when teens are feeling a lot of stress. Teens may even surprise their unsuspecting parents with crawling into bed with them. But this can be a good thing, and shows a teen's healthy need to reconnect at a difficult time. One of the best ways to help youth sleep well is to meet their underlying need for attachment, through either physical or emotional closeness.

Children and youth need to feel that their parents 'love them no matter what' (unconditional love). This unconditional love is a powerful way to make sure your relationship with your teen stays strong and close.

You can show your child or teen unconditional love by:

- Accepting your child for who she is;
- Respecting his likes and dislikes;
- Spending lots of time together, taking an interest in her life;
- Supporting his interests, not pressuring your teen into things **you** want;
- Not withdrawing love and attention when your teen messes up. This doesn't mean that you must approve of everything your teen does. Not everything is OK. You need to convey your love and concern for your teen as a person, but discuss the behaviour separately.

In the morning

- **Start the day with a warm and affectionate greeting!** This helps to start everyone's day on a positive note. Kind words, a smile or a hug are nice ways to reconnect first thing in the morning. Even with grumbling teens. Physical contact through a long, deep hug in fact will help make the body make oxytocin, a powerful bonding hormone.
- **Do your best to keep the same wakeup time every day** (weekends too). The body's internal clock works best with regular bedtimes and wake up times. When youth don't get enough sleep during the week, they often need to catch up on sleep over the weekend. It's better to aim for earlier bedtimes during the week, so they don't get sleep deprived.

Youth can be busy on weeknights with homework, sports, work and other activities. Sometimes they have too much on their plates. Consider limiting extra activities (perhaps just 1 or 2 activities each semester). At times when youth are very busy, they may need to get a little extra sleep on the weekend. But try to get them up at a reasonable time, especially on Sunday, so they'll be able to go to bed at a reasonable time Sunday evening.

During the daytime

- **Physical activity.** Try to help your teen get enough exercise. Being active as a family is good for everyone, and helps to build positive relationships. Throw the ball around outside, play road hockey, take a walk or a yoga class together. Physical activity with your teen is a great way to connect and spend time together.

Youth need at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. But timing is important-physical activity late in the evening can make it more difficult to fall asleep.

- **Healthy meals and snacks.** Canada's food guide will help you plan balanced meals and snacks. For more information, visit: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php
- **Limit naps.** Some youth are really tired when they get home from school. A short nap can be helpful, but long naps will interfere with night time sleep. Keep after school naps short-no more than 30-60 minutes.
- **Be cautious with stimulants.** Is your child having sleep problems since starting ADHD medications? If so, speak with your child's doctor.
- **Avoid or limit caffeine and energy drinks.** While your teen may want to rely on these drinks to stay alert during the day, they can further disrupt sleeping patterns.
- **Talk about stress.** Stress or emotional struggles can interfere with sleep. Give your teen a chance to talk with you about what he is feeling and going through. Listen, and validate these feelings. Ask your teen how she'd like you to support her. Try to avoid jumping in with advice or criticism. Conflict between family members is common. Reassure youth that you will work through these difficulties, and even though you may disagree, you love them no matter what.
- **Work out a reasonable time for bed.** You'll need to sort this out with your teen. It's much easier to have this kind of discussion if you've built up a strong, warm relationship. Spending positive, quality time with youth will help build this kind of relationship.

To talk about sleep, you might start by saying that you'd like to talk about your teen's sleeping habits. For example, "It must be tough to get through a long day of school when you're so tired." Ask your teen if she would like your advice, or if she would rather that you simply listen. Let your teen know that you've learned a few things about getting a good night's sleep, and offer to share that information when she's ready.

If your teen is ready to discuss sleep, together, you can think about when she needs to get up in the morning, then count back 8 1/2-9 1/2 hours. Suggest that your teen 'aim' for this as a weeknight bedtime. Gently encourage at least 9 hours of sleep each night.

Evening: helping your teen unwind

- **Connecting before directing.** Do everything you can to maintain a warm and positive relationship with your child or teen. Your child or teen needs to feel important to you, and feel safe talking to you about her feelings and worries. Sleep problems can come up or get worse if your child or teen doesn't feel he can turn to you, or if there is a lot of conflict between the two of you. Conflict can also make it less likely that your teen will accept your suggestions to improve sleep. If you have problems in your relationship with your child or teen that are not improving, consider getting help from a trusted friend, or family member. You may also think about speaking with a counsellor or therapist.
- **Avoid arguments in the hours before your teen goes to bed.** If you have to discuss something difficult, try to bring it up during the day. Difficult conversations close to bedtime can sometimes lead to arguments which make sleep harder-for both of you.

Gently encourage your teen to:

- **Turn off all electronics** (TV, video games, computers, or any screens that emit light) about 1 hour before bed. It's best to keep TVs and computers out of bedrooms altogether. Watching TV, movies, playing video games and connecting with friends on social media stimulate the brain, instead of letting it slow down. The light from screens also stops the brain from making melatonin (the hormone that promotes sleep).
- **Relax** by reading or listening to quiet music.

- **Go to bed when sleepy.** Your teen should associate bed with sleeping. Lying awake in bed is not helpful, and can actually make it more difficult to get to sleep. If your teen can't get to sleep in about 20 minutes, he should get up for about 30 minutes and do something non-stimulating.
- Don't drink too much liquid close to bedtime. A full bladder before bed means having to get up for a trip to the bathroom which doesn't help with sleep.

Children and youth will get better sleep

- **In the dark.** Darkness causes our brains to make the melatonin needed for falling asleep. Curtains or blinds should block out light. Some people like to wear 'eye shades' over their eyes.
- **Reducing 'blue light', which is the type of light which wakes people up by blocking your brain from making melatonin. In the evening 1-2 hrs before sleep, try to use:**
 - Low blue light lightbulbs (such as red or orange LED lightbulbs) instead of regular lightbulbs
 - Low blue light sunglasses, which are orange or amber coloured sunglasses that block blue light.
- **When it's quiet.** While this is true for many children and youth, others like some background noise, like from a fan or radio.
- **Without watching the clock.** If there is a clock in the room, make sure your teen can't see the time from the bed.
- **Without pets.** Although many pet owners like sleeping with their pets, studies show that pets in the bed can disturb sleep. If your teen is having trouble with sleep, find another place for the dog or cat to sleep.

About this Article

Written by members of the Mental Health Information Committee of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), an interdisciplinary group that includes psychiatry, psychology, child/youth care, social work, nursing, and occupational therapy. Special acknowledgements to Jeff McCrossin, social work candidate, and Jennifer Vriend, Psychology Intern, and to Dr. Elliot Lee, sleep disorders specialist at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre (ROMHC).

License

Under a Creative Commons License. You are free to share, copy and distribute this work as in its entirety, with no alterations. This work may not be used for commercial purposes. View full license at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/>

Disclaimer

Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.