



Why Do They Do That?

The Big Sleep

"I am tired of dealing with my son's sleep," exclaimed Janet. *"He would not sleep on a schedule as a baby, and now I can't get him to wake-up as a teenager. His sleep is making me tired!"* A query of parents around the world will find one of the most common struggles with parenting is sleep. Beginning with the first day of life and continuing into the college years, parents work to help their children get quality sleep each night while meet-



ing the waking demands of each day. We may not talk much about sleep, but parents spend a lot of energy focusing on the children's sleep habits. Much of what babies, children and adolescents experience with sleep is normal for their age, yet there are some sleep behaviors that are unique to their experience. Continue reading to learn what is normal and unique for your child's age.

Need more information?

Sleep can impact children's learning, moods, and motivation. Sleep is essential for good overall health.

More information about children and sleep may be found at www.sleepfoundation.org or www.sleepforkids.org.

Consult with your health care provider for specific questions related to your child's sleep habits.

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Ages Zero to Three

The biggest complaint from new parents is lack of sleep. Even though this period of sleepless nights typically lasts only a few months, a few months can seem endless when there is little sleep. Babies are born with an internal clock that regulates their sleep cycles. Most newborns will sleep up to 18 hours a day, yet these 18 hours is broken into 3-4 hour segments as babies wake-up often to eat. Babies are growing so quickly that they need to sleep most of the day to maintain their energy. Parents will notice that their newborns alternate between quiet sleep and active sleep. Quiet sleep is evident when babies are relaxed with regular breathing; even heart rates; and still eyes. Active sleep occurs when infants have irregular heart rates and breathing; their little bodies twitch, they have varying facial expressions and rapid eye movement. This active sleep cycle is considered important for brain maturation, and it diminishes as babies mature. By 6 months of age, nighttime sleep usually (not always!) lengthens to 6 hours of uninterrupted sleep as the brain matures. There can still be brief moments of waking, but infants will generally fall right back to sleep. Just when parents think their infants are sleeping through the night, babies who are around 9 months old will go into a phase of waking again and crying during the night. The reason for this has not been determined, but some theories conclude that teething or dreaming could be disturbing the sleep of the babies. This phase will quickly pass. The quality of a baby's sleep can be impacted by room temperature, sounds, light, and health. Parents should make adjustments to the environment to see if this aids in improving sleep for their babies. By the time babies are 2 years old, they should be sleeping around 13 hours a day which includes a nap. All parents of newborns must be aware of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. SIDS occurs when there is a sudden death of an apparently healthy infant. To reduce the risk of SIDS, parents are encouraged to place infants on their backs when sleeping; use a firm mattress; and keep blankets and soft toys out of the cribs. For more information about SIDS, log on to www.sids.org or consult with your health care provider.

Ages Three to Six

Children this age need around 11 hours of sleep. Naps usually end between the ages of 4 and 5. Although children are sleeping through the night at this age, there are many sleep challenges that occur for young children.

- **Separation Anxiety** Anxieties are common at this age with children trying to avoid separation from their parents at night. Children attempt to ease the anxiety by taking longer than before to get ready for bed; needing more things such as water or using the bathroom after getting in bed; taking longer to fall asleep; and waking more often during the night. Talking to children about their anxieties can help ease the tension. Using transitional objects such as a favorite toy or blanket or utilizing a nightlight can also help ease children's uneasiness.
- **Nightmares** Scary dreams are normal for children. Nightmares usually occur toward early morning hours. They can be reduced by avoiding scary stories or movies; going to bed on time; reducing stimulation prior to bedtime such as watching television or being around many people; and avoiding heavy meals close to bedtime. Stress from experiences such as divorce, starting a new school, or the illness of a family member can contribute to nightmares. If nightmares continue over several weeks, consult with your healthcare provider.
- **Night Terrors** Nightmares will wake children and they will usually remember their dreams, but night terrors have a different effect. Night terrors occur when a child abruptly appears to wake; open eyes; act agitated; scream, breathe rapidly; stare and/or swing arms. Children are not really awake during this time, and they will quiet down quickly without remembering anything about the incident the next morning. Do not wake your child during a night terror as this might frighten or confuse him or her. Simply allow your child to resume sleep. Night terrors typically occur between the ages of 3 and 13 and occur more often with boys. Although night terrors are not harmful for children, stress can contribute to their occurrence.
- **Sleepwalking** Sleepwalking is common for children, but parents need to ensure the safety of their young ones. Do not try to wake a child who is sleepwalking as this could confuse and/or frighten your child. Simply guide him or her back to bed. Childproof your home for safety by installing gates on stairs and bells on doors and windows.
- **Bedwetting** Enuresis, or bedwetting, occurs when children who are potty trained continue to wet the bed at night. Most children outgrow bedwetting by the age of 5, and almost all children have stopped by the age of 8. Children who wet the bed do not recognize the sensation of a full bladder while asleep, and, thus, they do not wake-up to urinate. The condition is usually genetic. The main problem with enuresis is the comments that are made to children who experience this condition. Avoid shaming children who wet the bed, and do not make this a topic of family conversations. Simply let them know that it is normal, and they will eventually outgrow this period. Help children have dry nights by restricting liquids two hours before bed, maintaining a consistent sleep schedule and waking the child during the night to urinate. If you are concerned about your child's enuresis, consult with your health care provider.

Most sleep disturbances are genetic, and children usually outgrow them. To help your young children sleep better, establish a 20 minute routine of quiet activities prior to bedtime; avoid scary stories, movies or loud music at night; encourage quiet play close to bedtime; use a small nightlight if necessary; be consistent with sleep and wake times; and adjust the bedtime to 15 minutes later if your children continue to have difficulties falling asleep.

Ages Six to Eleven

Children in this age group will sleep less than before because their growth rate is slowing. Although they now only need from 9-10 hours of sleep each night with no naps, many of these children do not get enough sleep. If children have a television or computer in their bedroom, they are inclined to get less sleep as they spend more time plugged in rather than resting. Children who do watch television or play on the computer prior to bedtime are more likely to resist going to bed; appear more anxious at bedtime; be slower in falling asleep, and are sleepy during the day. Many parents do not realize that their children are having sleep difficulties, and the results can be moodiness, a decline in grades, and lack of motivation. Parents should still be consistent with their children's sleep habits to ensure that children are well-rested. Children who struggle with sleep could be suffering from allergies, ear infections, or psychological or behavior problems. Consult with a health care provider if you are concerned about your child's quality of sleep.

Adolescents

Adolescents are experiencing an epidemic of sleep deprivation. Their lack of sleep is the result of many factors including:

- extra-curricular activities;
- part-time jobs;
- family responsibilities;
- overloaded classes;
- playing video games; and
- interacting on the Internet.

Teenagers who get insufficient sleep can experience:

- daytime sleepiness;
- lack of concentration;
- irritability;
- compromised school performance;
- lack of motivation;
- low-self esteem;
- symptoms of depression;
- poor eating habits; and
- an increase in car accidents.

(Note: Sleepiness in class may also be caused by poor vision.)

Adolescents actually need more sleep than when they were in elementary school because their bodies are, again, rapidly changing. Sleeping more on the weekends does not compensate for lack of sleep during the week, and a pattern of going to bed late and oversleeping in the morning can contribute to insomnia. Interestingly, the sleep pattern of teenagers has a biological basis. The hormone melatonin is routinely secreted signaling our brains that it is time for sleep. After teenagers experience puberty, the secretion of this hormone occurs later at night creating a physical need to go to bed later and wake-up later. So, although the school schedules do not change as children get older, their need to sleep later does. This impacts school performance by making it more difficult for teenagers to be alert for their earliest classes. Consequently, students who struggle with difficult classes in the morning may benefit from a change in schedule to move the challenging classes to the afternoon. Adolescent sleep needs are important, and every effort needs to be made to ensure that they are getting adequate amounts of sleep for physical, emotional and cognitive health.

And Adults?

Adults need sleep just like we did when we were children. Although many of us feel we can get by with less sleep, new research is constantly unveiling the effects that a lack of sleep has on our lives. Adults who do not get adequate sleep are more likely to be overweight; experience irritability; have problems at work; and suffer from insomnia. Signs that an adult is experiencing sleep difficulties include:

- trouble falling asleep;
- trouble staying asleep;
- waking-up earlier than desired;
- feeling tired in the morning; and
- sleepiness during the day.

Parents are the greatest role models for their children. Parents who develop good sleep habits will pass on this health value to their children. The following tips can improve the quality of your sleep.

- Maintain a regular routine of bedtime and waking-up time.
- Establish your own quiet nighttime routine before going to bed.
- Create a comfortable sleep environment which could include white noise, comfortable bedding and a cooler room temperature.
- Exercise regularly, but avoid exercising a few hours before bedtime.
- Eat a light meal for dinner, and stop eating a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and nicotine in the evening.

If you continue to have sleep difficulties, consult your health care provider. Children need their parents to be alert, awake and patient during the day. Adequate sleep helps improve parenting skills as a rested parent is an effective one.