

How much sleep do kids need?

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If you were told that there is one thing research has shown that can:

- Improve your child's behaviour
- Improve your child's school performance
- Improve your child's social relationships
- Decrease your child's chances of becoming obese
- Decrease the number of accidents and injuries your child suffers
- Strengthen your child's immune system
- Promote healthy growth and development including brain development...

...would you be interested?

Current research is telling us that getting adequate sleep does all of this and maybe more. Sleep is an important and basic necessity of life and research is helping us understand just how crucial it is. Despite all of this, sleep is often considered optional or at least as one area where we can cut corners to make room for other things requiring our time.

If you are a parent for whom sleep is but a distant memory, you are not alone. Sleep problems are some of the most common problems that parents report they have with their children. Bedtime battles are not limited to any one age. They can begin when your child is young and they can last into adolescence. Two common questions that parents have about their children's sleep are:

- How do I know if my child is getting enough sleep?

- What can I do to help my child get the sleep she or he needs?

How do I know if my child is getting enough sleep?

Writer and educator Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, in her book *Sleepless in America*, states that sleep-deprived children can include:

- Babies who sleep less than 14-16 hours in a 24-hour period with many short sleep periods.
 - Toddlers who sleep less than 13 hours in 24 hours including daytime naps.
 - Preschoolers who sleep less than 12 hours in 24 hours including daytime naps.
 - School-age children who sleep less than 10 hours per night.
 - Adolescents who sleep less than 9.25 hours per night.
- Sleep needs do however, vary from one individual to another. Some signs of tiredness may be more obvious than others. Signs you may see include a child who:
- Has “sleepy” behaviours such as yawning, thumb sucking, rubbing eyes, holding onto comfort objects such as a stuffed toy or blanket.
 - Doesn’t wake easily in the morning or has difficulty getting up.
 - Falls asleep at school or in the car or at times or places that you wouldn’t expect him to.
 - Fights going to bed even though you know he is tired.
 - Loses interest in play activities.
 - Has trouble getting along with others.
 - Is more impulsive, clumsy and accident prone.
 - Has physical complaints such as headache, tummy-ache, or

muscle pains, etc.

- Has a lot of difficult behaviours such as irritability, tantrums, fussing, whining, crying easily, overly active or “wired”, aggressive, demanding, impatient – to name a few.
- Has difficulty paying attention, focusing, listening or performs poorly (including poor school performance).

What can I do to help my child get the sleep she or he needs?

Research findings from a Québec study (published in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, 2005) of 1741 children at ages five, 17 and 29 months support three general recommendations for parents for establishing a good sleep pattern in their healthy child. Those recommendations are:

- Put your child to bed while sleepy but not yet asleep.
- Try to avoid night time feedings (though not with newborns or young infants).
- Do not bring the child into the parents’ bed.

This may sound simplistic but research has shown their importance. Studies also emphasize the importance of routine and an organized environment – that children who are put to sleep at the same time and place fall asleep more easily and have more regular sleep.

Here are a few more sleep-promoting ideas:

- Learn to recognize your child’s “sleepy” signs. Note the time that your child usually begins to show those signs and plan that he is ready for bed (bedtime routine finished, etc.) before this time. This is a short window of opportunity when your child is ready for sleep. Going beyond this time risks that your child will get his “second wind” as the body produces hormones to try to keep it awake. It is very difficult to settle to sleep after this. Your child may be very tired but is now unable to sleep.
- Physical activity and outdoor play contribute to improved sleep by tiring the body and decreasing tension. However, ensure that

this activity ends at least three hours before you want your child to sleep to allow time enough to unwind for sleep.

- Keep a regular bedtime that includes a bedtime routine. This routine helps to signal to the body that it is time for sleep. Some bedtime routine ideas include a bath, reading a story, putting stuffed animals to bed, soft music or any other lowkey activity that helps soothe your child for sleep. Maintaining a consistent routine (for eating, sleeping, etc.) helps set your child's body clock so that you will have "mother nature" working with you.
- If you need to make changes in the timing of your child's bedtime – like making it earlier, start with small changes such as 15 minutes earlier for a few days before making it another 15 minutes earlier. If the changes are too large, for example two hours earlier than her usual bedtime, she probably won't be sleepy yet and will probably be unable to sleep.
- Stress is known to interfere with sleep and it can be impossible to sleep when tense. Common stressors for children include any change, such as a new baby, a new home, school, caregiver etc., fears, family and parental stress (children are very good at sensing their parents' stress levels), an irregular schedule, and hunger (skipping breakfast for example). Even lack of sleep is a stressor. Consider also that stresses often accumulate meaning that if your child is dealing with more than one stress at a time, they add up to make tension levels too high for sleep. Pay attention to the signs of stress in your child. Teach your child how to recognize stress and teach her ways to deal with it, such as quiet time with a book, deep breathing, or talking about it. You can also help by offering back rubs or foot massages to help relax her when she is too tense to sleep.
- Provide a soothing environment for your child's sleep. It is easier to sleep in a room that is cool, dark, and quiet. It also helps if the stimulation levels are kept low without too many toys and books on display, and avoid painting the room in bright, stimulating colours. The bedroom is definitely not a good place for a television or computer. Keep lighting levels low. A nightlight can help you avoid the use of bright overhead lights. "White noise" can help to mask household noise and is in itself quite soothing.
- Avoid letting your child consume foods with caffeine. Cola drinks and

chocolate can provide enough caffeine to disrupt sleep for anyone. Children generally process caffeine differently than adults and can be even more adversely affected by its consumption.

Children who get the sleep they require for good health and optimal functioning benefit in all the ways mentioned earlier. They need their parents' help to do that.

If you have questions about helping your child develop healthy sleep habits, call Ottawa Public Health at 613-580-6744, TTY 613-580-9656 or go to www.ottawa.ca/health for more information.

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