Parenting Exchange
Bedtime #1 Library

by Karen Stephens

Good Sleep and Bedtime Habits Nourish Kids

Study after study reveals that sleep deprivation is epidemic in American children — and I'm talking the very young and teens alike. But believe me, anyone who has worked daily with kids knew about the epidemic long before the studies hit the news. Child care and school teachers face the fallout of children's sleep deprivation in vivid detail everyday.

Up to 85% of our children are staying awake much too late at night. Others aren't getting a daytime nap when they need it. Kids need to get an adequate amount of sleep each and every day, not just on weekends; otherwise, their bodies and minds just don't function very well. Just as food and water nourish the body, good sleep plays a major role in nourishment. Children's development in their most formative years doesn't progress well if kids are undernourished in terms of their zzzzzzzs.

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Not getting enough daily sleep impacts children's family and peer relationships. Many behavior problems can be directly tracked back to kids' insufficient sleep. It ends up creating a hassled family life and, in some extreme cases, even medicated children. Children trying to cope with too little sleep have less stamina for dealing with life's everyday stresses. They become moody and have more trouble controlling themselves during frustration. And they act out at the slightest provocation. They become what you and I may think of as short-fused.

Simple changes in a schedule or routine often bring on a protest of tears. When kids are suffering from poor sleep habits, any new skill or task overwhelms them. They end up giving up. So they experience failure rather than persisting to succeed. Without adequate sleep, kids just don't have the energy or emotional reserves to focus and hang tough in the face of anything too challenging. And that undermines confidence and self esteem.

Losing even a couple hours of sleep a night can sap children's mental energy. Lack of curiosity and disinterest in learning new things is a symptom of too little sleep. Lack of sleep also interferes with children's school performance. In particular, the parts of a child's brain that controls short-term memory don't function well when children are sleep-deprived. Such children have a much harder time paying attention and following directions. Both of these skills are needed if children are to experience success at home, child care, or school.

If parents don't establish good sleep habits for kids, including reasonable bedtimes and naps, children don't learn to listen to their body's internal sleep cues. If cues for rest and relaxation are ignored, children often behave wild and hyper just trying to keep themselves awake. Sadly, the more tired kids get the more active they become. It's often a never-ending spiral if parents don't take steps to establish better sleep patterns.

If you find your child consistently melts down, cries, or whines at the drop of a hat, it's time to review the sleep routines you've established. Emotional overload happens to all children from time to time. But if acting out or regressing to earlier immature behavior is always a child's first response to frustration, it's clearly a call for help. In many cases, the extra help they need isn't more playtime, television shows, special lessons, time in/time out, or medicine. What they may desperately need is regular, nourishing sleep.

You may wonder how much sleep kids need each day. Well, the younger the child, the more sleep he or she needs to fuel very rapid growth. Every child is a bit different; some need more sleep, some a little less. So it takes some close observation to see what suits your child best.

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When you determine your child's daily sleep needs, include full nights of sleep and daytime naps ranging from 1/2 hour to 2 hours. Infants up to 6 months benefit from three daytime naps. From 6 to 18 months, kids need two daytime naps. Children 18 months to age 5 typically need one daily nap. The chart below gives you a good estimate of how much total daily sleep a typical child needs at various ages. Compare the chart to the amount of sleep your child gets at child care and home combined. Then determine if your child's sleep patterns should be adjusted.

And by the way, refer to other columns in this library list to see how you can help your child adopt good sleep habits. They'll nourish them a lifetime.

Sleep Recommendations for Children

Age	Daily Hours of Sleep	Age	Daily Hours of Sleep
1 month	15½ to 17 hours	8 years	10¼ hours
1 month	15½ hours	9 years	10 hours
3 months	15 hours	10 years	9¾ hours
6 months	14½ hours	11 years	9½ hours
9 months	14 hours	12 years	9¼ hours
12 months	13¾ hours	13 years	9¼ hours
18 months	13½ hours	14 years	9 hours
2 years	13 hours	15 years	8¾ hours
3 years	12 hours	16 years	8½ hours
4 years	11½ hours	17 years	8¼ hours
5 years	11 hours	18 years	8¼ hours
6 years	10¾ hours		
7 years	10½ hours	Parents	Um, dream on. Parents don't sleep.

For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at www.ChildCareExchange.com.

- Bedtime related articles #2, #3, #4, #5

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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