

Busting the Biggest Myths About Kids and Sleep

If there's one thing that affects every part of family life—our kids' behaviour, *our* behaviour, and everyone's ability to cope—it's sleep.

And despite what you might sometimes think - or at least your kids might think - sleep is NOT a luxury item. It's a biological necessity that cuts to the core of our ability to function well.

In fact, my #1 Parenting Hack has nothing to do with parenting and nothing to do with the kids. It's this: get more sleep! Have you noticed how much better you are as a parent when you sleep well? It's miraculous!

But far too often, parents unknowingly fall for common myths about children's sleep needs. Let's tackle some of the biggest sleep myths holding families back—and look at what actually works.

Sleep Myth #1: Screen Time Helps Kids Wind Down

False. *Despite nearly half of parents believing screens help kids relax*, the science says otherwise. Interactive content, social media, and video games also stimulate the brain when it should be calming down, and delays sleep onset. It also reduces sleep quality. That's two strikes. Lower quantity of sleep and lower quality of sleep is a major downer.

What to do: Aim for a **screen-free hour before bed**. Replace screens with calming activities: reading a physical book, listening to calming music, or chatting about the day.

Sleep Myth #2: Kids Will Sleep When They're Tired

False. Children, especially younger ones, often don't realise they're tired—and won't voluntarily put themselves to bed. In fact, overtired children often become hyperactive, grumpy, or difficult to settle.

What to do: Stick to a predictable bedtime routine. Don't wait for your child to "crash." Pre-empt tiredness with a calming, consistent rhythm to the evening. Try to have sleep start at about the same time each night.

Sleep Myth #3 Catching Up on Sleep on the Weekend Works

Partly true—but not ideal. A weekend sleep-in might help after a late night or two. But chronic sleep debt builds up, and irregular sleep schedules can mess with the body's internal clock—just like jet lag. Sleeping in for hours on the weekend can actually make it harder to fall asleep on Sunday night and harder to wake up Monday morning, which starts the week off wonky.

What to do: Aim for bed and wake times within about 30 minutes of the usual, even on weekends. Consistency helps regulate your child's natural sleep rhythms.

Sleep Myth #4: A Later Bedtime Means They'll Sleep In

False. This one sounds logical—but it usually backfires. Young kids in particular have internal clocks that wake them early no matter what time they go to bed. And when kids don't get enough sleep, their bodies release more stress hormones—making it even harder to fall asleep the next night.

What to do: Keep bedtimes early and consistent. It may feel counterintuitive, but earlier bedtimes often mean better—and longer—sleep.

Bonus Myth (For Parents of Older Kids): Teens Who Sleep In Are Just Lazy

False. Teenagers are biologically wired to fall asleep later and wake up later. It's a normal shift in their circadian rhythm—not a character flaw.

What to do: Help teens build good sleep hygiene: wind-down routines, screen limits at night, and weekend sleep-ins—within reason. Support consistency, not perfection.

So How Much Sleep Do Kids Really Need?

Here's a rough guide:

- **Toddlers (1–3 years):** 12–14 hours (including naps)
- **Preschoolers (3–5 years):** 10–12 hours
- **Primary School (5–12 years):** 9–11 hours
- **Teens (13–18 years):** 8–10 hours (some need more)

But remember—every child is different. If they seem tired, grumpy, or struggle with focus, more sleep might be needed—even if they're hitting the “recommended” number.

3 Actionable Tips for Better Sleep (Starting Tonight)

1. Build a Consistent Wind-Down Routine

Quiet, predictable activities help signal to the brain that it's time for sleep. Start 30–60 minutes before bedtime. Keep it screen-free, low-stimulation, and calming.

2. Prioritise Daily Physical Activity

Regular exercise (earlier in the day) helps kids fall asleep more easily. Just avoid intense physical play right before bed.

3. Watch Out for Caffeine (If You're Raising Older Kids)

Teens are increasingly reaching for coffee, energy drinks, and even “healthy” options like matcha or green tea. But caffeine can stay in the system for up to 6 hours—making it harder to fall (and stay) asleep. Encourage caffeine-free drinks, especially after midday. Talk to older kids about how caffeine affects their sleep, energy, and focus.

When to Get Help

If your child consistently struggles to fall or stay asleep, snores loudly or stops breathing during sleep, or seems exhausted despite a full night's sleep, it may be time to speak with your GP or a sleep specialist. Sleep disorders are real and treatable. (Although you'll overcome many problems simply following the ideas outlined above.)

The more rested your child is, the more likely they are to be calm, focused, resilient, and happy. And the more sleep *you* get, the more present, patient, and positive you can be too.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.