

Building parent-school partnerships

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Is your teenager sleep-deprived?

Sleep research has shown that the brain practises what it has learned during the day when a young person is asleep. So sufficient sleep consolidates past learning as well as keeps a young person fresh to maximise their future learning.

Many teenagers today are sleep deprived because they don't get enough sleep. They need between nine and 10 hours sleep each night, yet most get about seven or eight hours sleep. Some get less. Sleep deprivation is akin to jet lag, where they don't function at their optimum. The sleep-wake cycle for teenagers is delayed by up to two hours. That is, they are sleepy later and awake later than when they were children.

Most teens secrete melatonin, which makes them sleepy, around 11.00pm, which makes the time before then a sleepless zone. Children secrete melatonin far earlier than this.

Cortisol, the chemical that wakes them up, is secreted at 8.15am for many teens. It seems the teen brain wants to be asleep just when most have woken up.

One US study found that 20% of teens were asleep in class in the morning, which had catastrophic effects on learning. As a result a number of high schools have delayed the start of school time to accommodate the teen sleep-wake cycle. This enables teens not only to get more sleep but to be at their best (or at least awake) when they are at school.

The results were startling and immediate, including better learning, better behaviour, less fights and fewer kids dropping out of school.

Sleep maximises brain growth, which occurs during adolescence. Sleep also consolidates learning. Sleep research has shown that the brain practises what it has learned during the day when a young person is asleep. So sufficient sleep consolidates past learning as well as keeps a young person fresh to maximise their future learning.

Sleep experts have noted that children who develop good sleep patterns tend to carry these into adolescence.

Good sleep habits include:

- 1 **Regular bed-times** Kids may fight this, but be regular during the week and let kids stay up a little later on weekends.
- 2 Have a **wind-down time** of up to 45 minutes prior to bed. This includes, removing TV and other stimuli, calming children down, and limiting food intake (and caffeine for teens).
- 3 **An established bed-time routine** that makes the brain associate behaviours such as cleaning your teeth and reading in bed with sleep.
- 4 Keeping **bedrooms for sleep** and not for TV. Bedrooms that resemble caves seem to be recommended.

- 5 Maximising the **three sleep cues** of: darkness (cave-like bedroom), lowering body temperature (baths can be good for this) and melatonin (work within their cycle).

Better knowledge of the biology of sleep and of sleep patterns, as well as instigating good habits, will go a long way to helping kids and teens get a good night's sleep.

Sleep tips for teens:

- 1 Allow them to catch up on lost sleep during the weekends.
- 2 Help your young person schedule their after school activities to free up more time for rest.
- 3 Discuss ways to limit stimulating activities such as television and computer around bedtime. Encourage restful activities such as reading.
- 4 Afternoon naps are good ways to recharge their batteries.
- 5 Make sure they go to bed early each Sunday night to prepare for the coming week.



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