

Resource Article

Children and Sleep

Emily Roby

Healthy Sleep

A healthy amount of sleep every night is important for children and teens. Young children between 3 and 6 years old usually need 11–13 hours of sleep. Children between 6 and 12 years old usually need 10–11 hours of sleep. Adolescents 13–18 years old usually need about 9 1/2 hours of sleep.

It may seem like a sleeping child or teen is doing anything of value. However, many important things are happening in the body and brain, things that can only happen when the child or teen is asleep.

Getting enough restful sleep every night is important. But, remember it is also normal for a child or teen to have some bad nights when sleep is restless or disturbed.

Help the children and teens in your care to understand how healthy sleep habits will help them to get enough sleep. Remind them that they spend almost 1/2 of their lives sleeping!

When Sleep Is a Problem

A number of things can keep children and teens from getting the sleep they need. These may be environmental distractions, such as noise or a room that is too hot or too cold. The child's or teen's sleep may be disturbed by issues within the body. These include pain, problems breathing, or wetting the bed. Stress can also cause sleep problems. Some children or teens worry when they are quiet and in bed. Others had traumatic experiences at bedtime, which may prevent them from getting enough sleep.

Consequences of Poor Sleep

There are many consequences of not getting enough sleep or sleeping poorly. Children or teens may have difficulty concentrating or focusing during the day. They will often feel tired and not have much energy. Some children or teens may become drowsy and fall asleep anywhere. Mood problems, such as irritability and moodiness, are common when children and teens sleep poorly. Some children may become very excited to keep themselves awake. They are less able to deal with the pressures of the day. Children and teens who have poor sleep habits are more likely to become sick, and it will be harder for them to recover. All of these problems can lead to difficulties in school.

Teach Healthy Sleep Habits

You can help children and teens to get enough sleep by teaching them healthy sleep habits.

- Allow enough time to sleep every night.
- Go to bed at the same time every night.
- Wake up and get out of bed at the same time every morning.
- Limit caffeine and sugar (soda, tea, sweets), especially in the afternoons and evenings.

- Limit drinks about an hour before bed. Encourage children to use the bathroom as part of their bedtime routine. This will reduce bed-wetting and the need to wake up to use the bathroom.
- Have a calm bedtime routine. This should include washing the face, brushing teeth, using the toilet, and praying. Some other things you may include are reading, writing in a journal, writing a letter, or anything else that helps the child or teen to relax.

Watch for Signs of Sleep Problems

If you see a child or teen consistently falling asleep in class, struggling to focus, or being hyperactive, ask him about his sleep habits. If the child or teen reports snoring, waking up gasping for air, or having to sleep sitting up to breathe, he needs to see a medical doctor.

Remember that many people have sleep problems. If children or teens struggle with sleep, they are not alone! Many sleep problems can get better.