No more night owl! How to adjust your child's sleep schedule for school



Great-horned owl, NPS Photo, Big Bend National Park

Okay, we admit it: our kids are definitely in summertime stay up late/sleep late sleep mode. With school starting soon, many of us now have to shift our children from summer to school year sleep schedules. Because school start times are constant (and early), the kids will have an easier time if you help them shift their bedtimes gradually over the period of a week or two toward the desired earlier bedtime. Remember, the average school-aged child needs 10-11 hours of sleep at night and even teenagers function optimally with 9-10 hours of slumber per night.

Here are some straight forward ways to help ensure good quality sleep for your child:

1) **Keep sleep onset and wake up times as consistent as possible 7 days a week.** If you allow your child to "sleep in" during the weekends, she will have difficulty falling asleep earlier on Sunday night, have difficulty waking up Monday morning, and start off her week over-

tired, more cranky, and less able to process new information—not good for learning. That said, you can allow your teens, who generally have a much earlier school start time than their biological clocks desire, to sleep in an hour or so on weekends to catch up on sleep.

2) **Limit or eliminate caffeine intake.** Often teens who feel too sleepy from lack of sleep drink tea, coffee, "energy drinks" or other caffeine laden beverage in attempt to self-medicate in order to concentrate better. What many people don't realize is that caffeine stays in your body for 24 hours so it is entirely possible that the caffeine ingested in the morning can be the reason your child can't fall asleep later that night. Know also that kids who drink "pre-work out" drinks may not realize that caffeine is one of the ingredients. Better to pre-hydrate with water. Caffeine can have side effects of jitteriness, heart palpitations, increased blood pressure, and gastro-esophageal reflux (heartburn). If your child already has a daily ice-tea, coffee, or other caffeine containing drink, let her wean down gradually- abrupt caffeine withdrawal can cause headaches.

3) **Keep a good bedtime routine.** Just as a soothing, predictable bedtime ritual can help babies and toddlers settle down for the night, so too can a bedtime routine help prepare older kids for sleep. Prevent your child from doing homework on his bed- better to associate work with a desk or the kitchen table and his bed with sleep.

4) **Avoid TV/computer/ screen time/smart phones just before bed.** Although your child may claim the contrary, watching TV is known to delay sleep onset. We highly recommend no TV in a child's bedroom, and suggest that parents confiscate all cell phones and electronic toys, which kids may otherwise hide and use without parent

knowledge, by one hour prior to bedtime. Quiet activities such as taking a bath, reading for pleasure, and listening to music are all known to promote falling asleep. Just be sure your kids put down the book, turn off the music, and turn off the light to allow time to relax in their beds and fall asleep. Many use this time for prayer or meditation.

5) **Encourage regular exercise.** Kids who exercise daily have an easier time falling asleep at night than kids who don't exercise. Gym class counts. So does playing outside, dancing, walking, and taking a bike ride. Participating in a team sport with daily practices not only helps insure better sleep but also has the added benefit of promoting social interactions.

Getting enough sleep is important for your child's academic success as well as for their mental health. We pediatricians have had parents ask about evaluating their children for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder because of an inability to pay attention, only to find that their youngster's focusing issues stem from tiredness. Teens are often so over-involved in activities that they average 6 hours of sleep or less per night. Increasing the amount of sleep in these kids will alleviate their attention problems and resolve any hyperactivity.

Additionally, sleep deprivation can cause symptoms of depression. Just recall the first few weeks of having a newborn: maybe you didn't think you were depressed but didn't you cry from sheer exhaustion at least once? A cranky kid or sullen teen may become much more upbeat and pleasant if they get an extra hour of sleep each night.

Unfortunately for children, the older they get, their natural circadian rhythm shifts them toward the "night owl" mode of staying up later and sleeping later, and yet the higher-up years in school start earlier so that teens in high school start school earliest at a time their bodies crave sleeping

late. A few school districts in the country have experimented with starting high school later and grade school earlier and have met with good success. Unless you live in one of these districts, however, your teens need to conform until they either go to college and when they can choose classes that start later in the day or choose a job that allows them to stay up later and sleep later in the day.

For kids of all ages, a night time ritual of “tell me about your day” can help kids decompress, help them fall asleep, and keep you connected with your child.

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