

Getting in Shape by Getting Enough Sleep

Sleep. Who has time for that? Adults rush through a never-ending “to do” list and children become more involved in activities as they get older. How many parents dread the ensuing power struggle when they tell their child it is bedtime and would rather just avoid it? And teens who have entered puberty often have a biologically-related sleep cycle in which they stay awake later and sleep later in the morning (if they can). But school still awaits at the same time the next morning, resulting in sleep deprivation, and the human body just can’t function at its best without adequate sleep.

What the Experts Recommend

According to “The American Academy of Pediatrics Guide to Your Child’s Sleep,” children ages 3-10 require 10-12 hours of sleep. If they are 11-12 years old they need about 10 hours of sleep per night and teenagers need about 9 hours.

What Happens as the Body Sleeps

During sleep, the human body does more than just rest and reenergize. Sleep allows the body to concentrate on repair without sharing energy with all the other tasks we perform while we're awake. Cell growth and cell repair take place to combat the effects of stress and UV rays. Muscle tissue is mended, the human growth hormone HGH is produced, and the immune system is recharged.

What Happens When the Body Doesn’t Sleep

Signs of lack of sleep in children (and we might as well admit it, in adults too) can be crankiness and irritability, emotional overreactions, difficulty concentrating, decreased productivity, forgetfulness, and even hyperactivity. Sleep deprivation impairs a student’s ability to memorize and process information. The immune system becomes less effective at fighting against illness and the body recovers slower from injury. Mental well-being can be greatly affected—getting enough sleep each night helps the mind to unwind and cope with stress.

Tips for Helping a Child Get Enough Sleep

There are many things that a parent can do to ensure their child is getting enough sleep and therefore is able to be alert and learning at school. Some suggestions are:

- Consider removing television sets, computers, and video games from the bedroom. These encourage activity, alertness, and a desire to play instead of dozing off for the night.
- Remove all toys from the bed except for a favorite stuffed animal or doll. This designates the bed as a place for sleeping rather than playing.
- Don’t let children consume caffeinated products (such as pop, chocolate, hot chocolate, tea, etc.) after 4 p.m.
- Avoid sending a child to bed as a punishment. Bedtime should be a loving, positive time.
- Move the child's bedtime up (to an earlier time) if they frequently wake up during the night. One sign that a child is getting the right amount of sleep is if they fall asleep within 15-30 minutes of going to bed. Also, they will wake up easily at the time they need to get up and don’t need the continued nagging to get up.



Getting in Shape by Getting Enough Sleep, cont.

Tips for Helping a Child Get Enough Sleep, cont.

- In the evening, watch for the child to slow down and get physically tired. That's the time that they should be going to sleep. In the future, try to get their bedtime routine done and get them into bed before that time. If bedtime is delayed, children will often get a second wind and then argue that they're not tired.
- Light affects the normal biological sleep-wake cycle. Keep lights dim in the evening as bedtime approaches. In the morning, bring on the bright light to signal "wake up!"
- Unwind with a quiet activity 30 minutes before starting the bedtime routine.
- Be consistent with a bedtime routine the same each night. Children like to know what to expect. At the end of the routine, the lights go off and it is time to fall asleep.
- Make bedtime a special time, interacting with children in a loving and secure way.
- The soothing warmth of a bath as part of the regular bedtime ritual will induce drowsiness.
- Make reading together part of the bedtime routine.
- Some scents promote relaxation. Try a drop of lavender oil or jasmine oil on the pillowcase, a bubble bath in those scents, or a lightly scented air freshener.
- Allow soft music or a nightlight. Some children are soothed by the sound of a vaporizer or fan running.
- Don't let children watch TV at bedtime (in fact, remove the television from their bedroom if they have one) and limit them to less than two hours of watching during the day.
- Leave the room while your child is still awake.
- Remain calm and patient when your child calls for you. Yelling back "Now what???" doesn't help them drift off.
- Don't pick up a school-age child if they continue to call for you or fight going to sleep. Instead, simply reassure them that you are nearby and that you will come back to check on them during the night.



For more information about sleep and children, please visit:
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/starslp/index.htm>
<http://www.sleepforkids.org/html/habits.html>