

Sleep Hygiene

Children and adolescents who do not get enough sleep have a higher risk for many health and behavior problems. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that children aged 6-12 years should get 9-12 hours of sleep per night while teenagers need 8-10 hours of sleep. According to the CDC, 60% of middle schoolers and 70% of high schoolers report inadequate sleep on school nights. Not getting enough sleep can put kids and teens in a sort of haze that can negatively affect the way they think, react, and learn. There is no doubt that sleep deprivation can affect academic performance and physical health, but lack of sleep can also have a strong impact on mental wellbeing, especially during the teen years.



The body's stress response worsens during sleep deprivation. Research has found several links between lack of sleep and increased feelings of stress and anxiousness, difficulty regulating emotions, increases in depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, attention deficit issues, and behavior issues. Experts note that lack of sleep can contribute to the onset of mental health concerns, and also make existing mental health concerns harder to manage.

There are many reasons why teenagers struggle to get enough sleep, including demanding school schedules on top of balancing extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, homework, community activities, and social commitments. With so much to try to fit into each day, many teens do not allocate sufficient time for sleep. Smartphones and other devices used around bedtime also reduce sleep time. These devices emit blue light, which has been shown to reduce or delay the natural production of melatonin (a hormone responsible for making a person feel sleepy) and decrease feelings of sleepiness. Blue light can not only make it harder to fall asleep but it also interferes with sleep quality because it reduces the amount of time spent in the REM stage of sleep. This stage is important for cognitive functioning. Youth are more sensitive to the effects of blue light than adults and recent studies have found that 75% of children/adolescents use devices in their bedroom or in bed (Sleep Foundation). Experts also note that one of the main reasons teens in particular struggle to get enough sleep is that they are biologically programmed to be night owls. As kids enter adolescence, their circadian rhythms change, and their body releases melatonin about two hours later. This changes their sleep-wake cycles, making it difficult to go to sleep at a time that will allow them to rise easily in the early morning hours when school starts.

So, what can parents and caregivers do to help promote more quality sleep for their youth? A good step is to start by reviewing your teen's sleep hygiene together. This includes exploring their sleep environment and habits. Below are some tips that can help in this process:

- Help youth keep a regular sleep schedule; this means going to sleep and waking up at the same time most days of the week.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine; for example, use mindfulness activities or meditation, listen to relaxing music, read a book, or take a warm bath.
- Assess your youth's weekly schedule together and see if they are over-committed. Help them to trim activities and create a more balanced schedule, if possible.
- Set a “media curfew”- Turn off all screens (TV, computers, phones, tablets, and video games) at least 1 hour before bedtime.
- Promote the benefits of staying active. Exercise may help with falling asleep and sleeping more deeply.
- Encourage healthy habits such as avoiding stimulants in the evening like coffee, tea, soft drinks, and energy drinks.
- Keep bedrooms cool, dark, and quiet.

American Academy of Sleep Medicine; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Child Mind Institute; Journal of Youth and Adolescence, JAMA Pediatrics, Nationwide Children’s Hospital; Sleep Foundation