

Parents and children suffer effects from lack of sleep

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(Photo: Getty Images)

There are few things more essential to a happy family than adequate sleep. Unfortunately, our modern lives are making that difficult to achieve.

According to a 2014 National Sleep Foundation poll, 34 percent of parents reported that scheduled evening activities pose challenges to their child getting a good night's sleep, while 41 percent say these activities challenge their own good night's sleep. One in four parents also reported that in the last seven days, homework made it more difficult for their child to get a good night's sleep.

Just how much sleep is enough varies among individuals, but Dr. Melissa Hidde, a resident with UW Health Fox Valley Family Medicine, said kids need more sleep than adults to be rested.

"Infants need 14 to 15 hours of sleep," Hidde said. "Toddlers need 12 to 14 hours of sleep; preschool-age kids need 11 to 13 hours; school-aged kids need 10 to 11 hours, and teenagers need nine to 10 hours. Every child, just like every adult, is a little bit different, but in general, kids need more sleep than adults."

Adults, according to National Sleep Foundation guidelines, should strive for seven to nine hours each night. While the amount of sleep we need may vary, the effects of sleep deprivation are similar among the ages.

"When it comes to more of the short-term effects of sleep loss, just losing a few nights here and there or a couple hours here and there, I think those signs of sleep deprivation that we can see in adults are similar to what we see in kids," said Dr. Jillian Schuh, psychologist with Catalpa Health in Appleton. "They have greater difficulty in getting up in morning, during the day they have a harder time with concentration, and there is an increased emotionality."

Schuh said a 2004 study by the National Sleep Foundation found that 69 percent of children experience at least one or more sleep problems several nights during the week.

"I think sleep issues occur for a lot of children," she said. "If this happens chronically over a long period of time, sleep restriction is associated with impaired memory, poor academic performance, and there are the physical factors too. Kids are at greater risk for obesity if they have chronic sleep loss."

Not only can a lack of sleep lead to irritability but also outbursts of aggressive behavior or bullying, Hidde said.

"When the body doesn't get enough sleep, it can make it more difficult to think clearly, for example, when doing homework," she said. "There is also a growing body of evidence that not getting enough sleep can affect growth and the immune system. There is even some data to show that not getting enough sleep can lead to mental health problems down the road like depression and anxiety. Overall, missing out on sleep can cause problems in nearly every area of a child's life."

The good news, Schuh said, is that studies show that even with a history of sleep loss, children's habits can be changed and the benefits in cognition are almost immediate.

"Children who increase their sleep by just one hour a night for at least three consecutive nights show improvement on tests of working memory and tests of reaction time too," she said. "Adding just a little sleep to the child's current schedule can have an immediate impact."

Scott Schuldes, a certified family nurse practitioner and associate medical director at ThedaCare Physicians in Hilbert, said sleep is absolutely essential to optimal health for adults as well.

"If I were to build a triangle of health, it would include proper nutrition, movement and the third part would be sleep," Schuldes said. "As adults, we should be getting eight to 10 hours of sleep each night. In the daily grind of raising young kids, working 14-hour days and trying to provide the best for our families, we need sleep."

While we sleep, our body repairs itself, he said. Studies show that people who do not get enough sleep are more likely to catch a virus than a well-rested person; it also takes them longer to recover.

"Over time, poor sleep habits increase your chances of getting diabetes, becoming obese and developing cardiovascular problems," he said. "Many of us think we're too busy to get to bed early, but just like you have to make time for exercise, you need to make time for sleep."

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Tips for getting enough sleep

The National Sleep Foundation (<http://sleepfoundation.org>) offers several tips for setting a healthy sleep pattern for all family members.

- » Make sleep a priority in your family's schedule.
- » Set appropriate and consistent bedtimes for the family and stick to them.
- » Create a plan for your children for appropriate electronic use at night and set boundaries about use before and after bedtime.
- » Educate the family about how light from electronic device screens can interfere with sleep.
- » Talk to your child about the importance of sleep for health and well-being.
- » Talk to your child's teacher about your child's alertness during the day. Let your child's teacher know that you want to be made aware of any reports of your child falling asleep in school.
- » Remember that as a role model, you need to set a good example.
- » Create a sleep-supportive bedroom and home environment, dimming the lights before bedtime and controlling the temperature. (Temperatures above 75 degrees and below 54 degrees can disrupt sleep.)
- » Encourage activities like reading or listening to music before bedtime instead of TV or electronics use.
- » Make sure children's activities, including homework, can be completed without interfering with bedtimes.

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