Half of All Kids Aren't Getting Enough Sleep: Here's Why That's Concerning

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March 7, 2020 By Michael Breus, PhD

Poor sleep is rampant in the United States — and it's not only impacting adults.

Alarmingly, research indicates U.S. children are facing a sleep crisis as well. And this is a problem that's even more concerning than the one facing older Americans, considering how important sleep is to childhood development.

One study in particular from late 2019 has stuck with me over the last few months. Researchers from the American Academy of Pediatrics found **nearly 50%** of kids aged 6-17 weren't getting enough sleep, which is 9 hours each night. (Harvard University has pegged 9-12 hours for grade school-aged children, and 8-10 hours for teens as the recommended amount of sleep each night.)

This is a major problem, considering the percentage of kids getting insufficient sleep is much higher than the 34.8% of American adults who get less than 7 hours of sleep each night. And that's already too high as it is.

The A.A.P. study looked at more than 49,000 school age children and adjusted for several factors, including poverty level and time spent on devices; it also adjusted for mental health conditions and adverse experiences like abuse and neglect. Even considering these handful of factors, the results indicated poor sleep was an obvious barricade that negatively affected childhood performance.

For example, when compared with kids who got 9 hours of sleep or less most nights, those children who got sufficient sleep showed **44% greater odds** of wanting to learn new things. Kids who got 9 hours of sleep or more also had **33% better odds** of finishing their required homework, and a **28% better chance** of caring about school. In short, the study was clear: quality sleep supports better schoolwork.

Why Sleep Is Important for Kids

Sleep is vital for everyone, no matter their age. But sleep plays an especially critical role for kids. That's because sleep impacts several aspects of the maturation process.

First, sleep is a natural weight regulator for children. One study from Penn State University found a "strong link" between childhood obesity and insufficient sleep. That's because poor sleep can negatively affect leptin, a hormone created by our fat cells that tells us when to stop eating. By making sleep a priority right from the beginning, parents give their kids a better chance of avoiding childhood obesity.

Sleep is also an important safeguard against injuries. Research shows getting enough sleep leads to a significant reduction in adolescent injuries. One study found teenage athletes have a 68% better chance of avoiding injuries if they get sufficient sleep, compared to teenagers who get less than 8 hours each night. Whether your kids are involved in gymnastics, cheer, or playing sports, be sure to keep this in mind.

We've all told our kids if they want to grow, sleeping is essential. But that's not just an old wive's tale, it's 100% true. The reason: growth hormone is mainly secreted during R.E.M. sleep, the period of the night best associated with dreaming. Insufficient sleep, on the other hand, can stifle growth.

Coupled with what we touch on earlier, about sleep's role in helping kids perform better and show more interest in school, sleep should be a paramount concern for parents.

Parents Are Desperate for Sleep Advice

Here's the thing: parents, for the most part, already have a baseline understanding of how important sleep is for their kids. But the problem is, they're often too busy — and sleep deprived — themselves to fully address the sleep issues facing their children.

That's where childhood sleep consultants come in. An article from Vox recently caught my eye on this growing trend for parents looking to help their kids get better sleep. The consultants come in, analyze the roadblocks kids are running into with their sleep habits, and develop a structure the parents can stick to that'll help their children get the sleep they need. What really stood out to me is how expensive this approach can be for parents.

As the article pointed out, “the largest practical barrier to accessing services provided by sleep consultants is cost.” The price for a sleep consultant “can range from less than $100 to thousands of dollars.” And in most cases, since it’s classified as “alternative therapy,” these consultations aren’t covered by medical insurance.

I certainly empathize with these parents; they’re simply looking to help their kids. But I also worry about people spending lots of money on solutions they can find elsewhere. Before spending hundreds or even thousands of dollars on childhood sleep consultants, be sure to try the following tips.

Tips for Helping Kids Get Better Sleep

- Limit Screen Time: Electronic devices can get in the way of quality sleep. That’s because blue light, which radiates from our phones and other devices, hampers melatonin production and makes it harder to fall asleep. To counteract the negative effects blue light can have on sleep, have your kids avoid their screens an hour before bed.

- Stick To Your Routine: Consistency is key. Sketch out a bedtime routine that your kids can routinely lean on: “At 8:30 p.m. we change into our pajamas, brush our teeth, and pick a book to read.” This will help your children develop regular sleep habits and promote better sleep. Bedtime rituals are equally important for kids and adults who want to be successful sleepers. I’ve written a lot about bedtime rituals and power down hours, I think you’ll find this information very useful.

- Stay Cool: A comfortable sleep environment for kids is just as important as it is for adults. And that goes beyond falling asleep in a dark, quiet room. Remember, you want to keep it cool. The temperature in your room shouldn’t be warmer than about 67 degrees. This helps kids and adults fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer. I love the Chilipad for keeping your bed nice and cool.

- Limit Stress: Kids have a hard time falling asleep when they’re stressed; stress leads to a spike in cortisol, a hormone that is an important part of the sleep-wake cycle. To limit stress, make sure there is ample time between when your kids finish homework or sports and fall asleep.

Stick with these tips, and your children will have a great start at avoiding the sleep problems impacting about half of all U.S. kids. Thanks for reading this week!

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