

Sweet Dreams of Sleep

Adequate sleep can truly change a person's life. Is your family getting enough?

by Val Krage

Feeling like you and your family could have used a little more sleep last night? If the answer is yes, you are not alone.

Families are getting about 20 percent less sleep than they did 100 years ago, and if anything, the situation appears to be getting worse. As many as 50 percent of individuals at all ages are routinely getting one to three fewer hours of sleep each night than they need, and the impact of this can be profound.

In addition to behavioral issues including hyperactivity, lack of attention span, emotional distress, impatience, and misbehavior in children, there are now known to be serious cognitive and health issues associated with chronic sleep deprivation. According to several recent studies, for example, even one hour of lost sleep each night can significantly decrease a child's academic performance in school, lowering a child's cognitive abilities by as much as two grade levels.

Finally, there is now a clear link between sleep deprivation and obesity. Sleep loss increases hormones that stimulate hunger, while decreasing those that suppress appetite. The production of human growth hormone is also disrupted. Research throughout the U.S., as well as overseas, points to the

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same conclusion: On average, children who sleep less have more body fat than children who sleep more. Rising obesity rates throughout the world can be attributed, at least in part, to sleep-deprived children and adults.

So how much sleep is enough? While everyone is different, the average adult needs about eight hours of quality sleep each night, but actually gets less than seven. Preschoolers need 13 hours, while averaging less than 10-1/2, and school age children need between 10 and 11 hours, but in reality are getting 9.5. According to the National Sleep Foundation, half of school-age children are not receiving the sleep they need for optimal performance. The news on adolescents is even more dismal. While they need approximately nine hours of sleep each night, the average teen is racking up less than seven.

While the impact of sleep deprivation is profound and even frightening, the causes may not be as clear. Why, if sleep is so important for our health and well-being, do we fight it and even consider it a waste of precious time? There are three major reasons that our society doesn't value sleep, according to Mary


What can parents do to help ensure quality sleep for the entire family?

- ✦ Make sleep a priority. Cut back or even eliminate evening activities that cut into sleep.
- ✦ Insist on a regular bedtime and wake time seven days a week that includes a predictable bedtime routine.
- ✦ Limit screen time, especially in the evening, and use early evening for quiet, wind-down activities.
- ✦ Eliminate caffeine, which stays in a child's body up to eight hours. Have regular meal times to keep kids' bodies on schedule.
- ✦ Make sure your child has at least one hour of physical activity each day, but not after supper.
- ✦ Ensure children have adequate downtime throughout the day.
- ✦ Make sure the house is relatively quiet and darkened in the evenings, and let in the light in the morning.

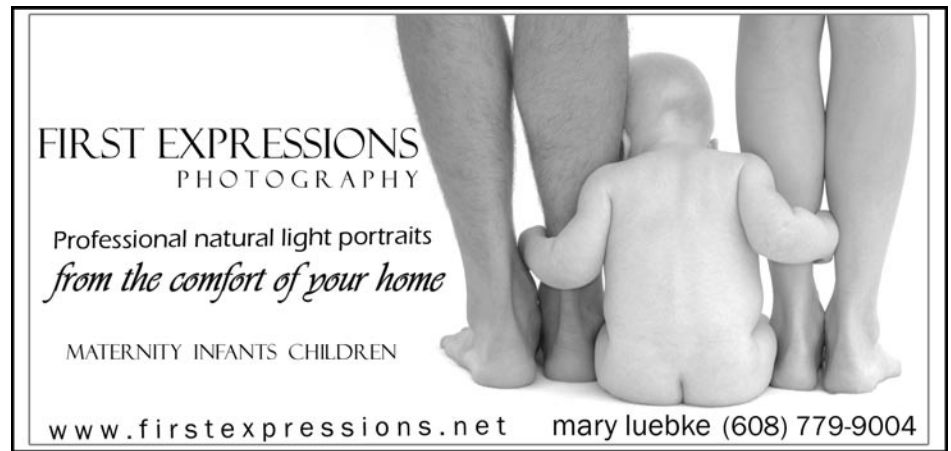
Sheedy Kurcinka, author of "Sleepless in America" (Harper Collins, 2006).

Science (including our knowledge of brain development and the impact of technology on our sleep habits). Our youngest children are so overwhelmed with our attempts to stimulate their brains with activities, visuals, and educational toys galore, they aren't able to unwind and experience quality sleep. For older children and adults, the plethora of technological gadgets, including televisions in the bedroom, stimulate the brain into thinking it is time to be awake. That's why allowing your child to watch TV as part of the bedtime routine is counterproductive. Even if he does fall asleep after watching "Sponge Bob," it will be a less restful sleep. For adults, experts say one of the most alluring sleep distractions is the 24-hour accessibility of the Internet.

Safety concerns. Unlike their parents, who typically biked everywhere and enjoyed spontaneous games of ball in the park, children are more likely to participate in organized activities, partly because we believe it benefits them and partly because we're afraid to leave them unsupervised. Whether or not these fears are founded, the fact remains that these activities are typically run by adults, on their schedules, usually in the evening. So rather than being home winding down for bedtime, many of our children are spending their evenings in lessons and activities.

Pressure to achieve and succeed. Our children are expected to excel in a myriad of activities: music, athletics, academics, and more, spending many hours in structured events that enable them to do so. These events may not only cut into their sleep time, but the pressures on our children can cause them to be in a constant state of "alert" so that even when they do have time to relax, their brains and bodies won't let them. 

Val Krage is a licensed parent educator with the La Crescent-Hokah School District, and teaches classes on sleep throughout Southeastern Minnesota. Val and her husband are the parents of three well-rested children.



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