

Health Tips for Parents

FEBRUARY 2012 | VOLUME 80

Is my child getting enough sleep?

A good night's sleep is critical for a child's growing body and brain. A rested child learns better, remembers more and has an easier time staying focused at school. Children who get enough sleep also have fewer behavior problems.



How much sleep is enough? Recommendations vary with age: most toddlers get between 12-14 hours, while preschoolers and school-aged children get 10-12 hours. (For toddlers and preschoolers up to age 5 years old, those hours include a nap.)



While those guidelines can be helpful, the numbers are just averages and don't necessarily apply for every child. The best way for parents to know if their children are getting enough sleep is by looking at how they behave, says Tumaini Rucker Coker, M.D., M.B.A., a pediatrician at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA.

"Every child is going to be different and will have different needs for sleep," Dr. Coker says. "The numbers are less important than a parent's observations."

Children who have trouble waking up in the morning, are cranky or irritable during the day, or instantly fall asleep during short car rides, are probably not getting enough shut-eye at night, Dr. Coker says.

Working parents sometimes let their children stay up late so they can spend time with them at the end of the day. If the child wakes up easily in the morning and seems fine, it's not a problem. But parents should try to keep bedtime consistent, as children with changing bedtimes can suffer problems falling or staying asleep.

Another pitfall parents should avoid is allowing children to skip naps or stay up late in the hopes they will fall asleep easier at bedtime. Unfortunately, the plan usually backfires.

Children who get enough sleep but seem chronically tired or fall asleep at unexpected times may suffer from a sleep disorder, such as sleep apnea. "That's an issue to talk to your doctor about," Dr. Coker says.

Tips to help children stay well rested:

- Pick a bedtime that allows your child to wake up easily in the morning.
- Be consistent. Once you choose a bedtime, stick with it.
- Develop soothing, age-appropriate rituals that help your child relax as bedtime approaches.
- Avoid stimulating activities such as television or video games at least an hour and a half before bedtime.
- Make reading a book together part of your bedtime routine.



Setting Bedtime Routines

"Kids get overtired when they don't get enough sleep and that can make it more difficult for them to get to sleep when bedtime comes," Dr. Coker says. "Sticking to a reasonable bedtime and bedtime routine can actually help children sleep better at night."

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health System pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood. In addition to our Children's Health Center in Westwood, we have offices in Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional.