

Quality and Quantity of Sleep

by Mariola Strahlberg

Why is sleep so important? What is the adequate amount of sleep? What about the quality of sleep? Many organizations, including the National Sleep Foundation, point out a disturbing fact that our children do not get enough sleep.

If you pay close attention, you will notice that besides more frequent colds and other illnesses, children will complain of stomach aches, will be more anxious or depressed and have more meltdowns. This also carries into the classroom where there is less concentration and more irritability. This is true for the very young child as well as the teenager.

Why is good sleep so important? Did you notice what happens during the summer? It is during the summer, when children spend lots of time outdoors, doing physical activities versus academic activities, that they grow the most and their physical body changes most noticeably.

During the school year, when they get sick and stay home for a few days, relaxing, sleeping and eating nutritious foods, we observe similar changes. During the academic year, when the child is on a tight schedule with school, homework and extra-curricular activities, the only time they can truly relax is at night. If at night they do not get enough good quality sleep, their body and mind will not function well.

How much sleep do children need?

The amount of sleep varies with the seasons. When the sun is strong and the days are long, children require less sleep than during the shorter days and weaker sun.

Average sleep requirements:

- Up to 3 years old: 13 hours of nightly sleep
- 3 to 7 years old: 12 hours of nightly sleep
- 7 to 10 years old: 11 hours of nightly sleep
- 10 to 14 years old: 10 hours of nightly sleep
- 15 to 24 years old: 9 hours of nightly sleep.

Children tend to sleep longer at times of rapid growth and illness.

If a child needs much more or much less sleep than average, they may have an internal imbalance even though a disease has not yet developed and preventive care is recommended.

How can parents help children develop healthy sleeping habits?

First, help the children go to sleep on time to get enough good quality sleep during the night.

Consistent going to bed times are important since consistent daily rhythm helps the child become more disciplined both outwardly as well as inwardly. Children usually thrive on a degree of order in their lives, provided the rules are relaxed during special occasions.

Second: transition between daily activities and sleep are very important. Homework (even the boring and long one), electronics and any stimulating activities need to end at least 30 minutes before sleep. We need to institute "quiet time" or "transition time" between daily activities and bedtime. This point requires reevaluating the amount of homework and extracurricular activities. It often requires cutting out some of the activities in order to prevent "kids burnout".

Third: the child's room needs to be aired out daily (even if it is for only 10 minutes in the morning or evening), cleaned and straightened up. All the electronic devices, including TV, computer, cell phone, Internet, ipod, need to be shut down and located a minimum of 6 feet away from the child's head.

And remember, adequate, restful sleep is not just for kids!