

Improving Sleep

One of the most important factors to address in helping children with self-control or attention, is their sleep. This begins with understanding the importance of sleep for your child.

Sleep is essential for growth, fighting infection, memory, learning, emotional regulation, on and on and on. Unfortunately, we don't protect our children's sleep and sleep factors, sleep problems get in the way of their learning and their behavior. Sleep issues have been associated with ADHD for many, many, many years.

Addressing your child's sleep begins with understanding their sleep needs. I highly recommend that you talk to your pediatrician or go online to a sleep site to get a sense of what a child's sleep needs might be. Often parents make the mistake of assuming that because their child gets up early in the morning, they don't need more sleep. Often children are getting up for reasons that have nothing to do with their sleep needs. It may reflect their biological clock, it may reflect that they want to get up early to play a game or watch tv, or it may be a reflection of the noises that are going on around the house that are waking up your children. One way to find out whether your child might need more sleep is to see if they sleep in on a school day, not on a weekend when we know they want to get up early. We don't tell them, of course, that we're going to let them sleep in, we're just going to watch the next day to see how long they would naturally sleep.

Once you've established your child's sleep needs, the answer to getting more sleep is not to put them to bed earlier. The answer is following a good routine and considering all sleep habits that are associated with falling asleep. If you put children to bed earlier, they often will just stay awake longer in their bed. We do not want that. Let's begin with the routine. The routine should be gradual and reflect a winding down over the course of the evening. Often what happens is dinners are too late and so the brain is actually staying awake until its fed, and the children don't have time to wind down and fall asleep naturally.

Many children don't get enough physical activity. We need vigorous physical activity in the afternoon so the body is ready to sleep in the evening.

We also have to be careful about light. Light has an enormous impact on a child's sleep. Where they have bright lights overhead in the evening, or they have access to tablets where the light is shining on their eyes, the brain thinks its still daytime, I need to stay awake. We want to dim the overhead lights, and avoid tablets and computers so that the sleep process can begin.

We also want to make sure that children don't go to bed hungry. Often children are not as hungry at dinnertime because perhaps medication is affecting their appetite, or perhaps they haven't settled well enough to have dinner, and they need a snack before bed.

We also have to orchestrate calm down activities. Often what happens is I find is that we're engaging children in activities and winding them up instead of calming them down. Perhaps more importantly, what happens is the children engage in their fun calm down activities and then they're asked to get ready for bed. The proper routine is when they get ready for bed, and then you engage

them in that calm down activity. That's when you read together, watch a calming show, do a jigsaw puzzle, play a card game, something quiet and calm to get them ready to go to bed.

The bedtime environment is very, very, very important. Often there are too many play things in the bedroom and the children stay up playing instead of going to sleep. The bedroom needs to be comfortably cool. Often the bedroom is too hot or too noisy and children have trouble falling asleep.

We have to look at what sleep habits we're creating for our children. I'm afraid to say that often parents are too big a part of those sleep habits. Sure, it's great to read a story to your child as part of helping them fall asleep, but if you were sitting there with them, reading to them, until they fall asleep, you are the sleep habit, and then when your child wakes up at night, as we all do, and their sleep habit is gone, they will come looking for you to help them go back to sleep. I prefer a sleep habit that the children can engage in more independently. My favorite is listening to audio books or podcasts, something calming. Music works for some children, but not for others. Something absorbing that the children can put their minds on to help settle their mind and body. Be careful not to find a book or a podcast that is too exciting. If children are staying up to hear the next chapter of the story, they of course are not going to fall asleep. It often works to listen to a book that they've already read so they don't have to stay up to hear the ending of the story. Other families develop other habits, but the most important thing is it has to be a sleep habit that the child can engage in without you being there. It's okay if you've been part of your child's sleep habit, to be present when we develop the new sleep habit. You can listen to the story along with your child, and then gradually step out, come back in, step out, come back in, so the child ultimately learns to fall asleep to the audio book, or whatever other sleep habit you choose.

The parent role is very, very important. Often what happens, is parents find themselves talking about stressful things with their children before going to bed. I don't believe that this is healthy. If you want to have an extended reading period with your child, then that's great, but don't do it in bed. Bedtime should be for sleeping, not for reading and playing for extended amounts of time. If you're going to talk about the events of the day, talk about it at dinnertime or after dinner, not necessarily while they're in bed.

Remember also that there are a number of medical factors that might affect the quality, not just the quantity of your child's sleep. Medications can affect sleep, children can have sleep apnea or other breathing problems that affect their sleep, there's teeth grinding, acid reflux, night terrors. There are a variety of factors that might affect the quality of your child's sleep. If you suspect that one of those factors is impacting your child's sleep quality, talk to your physician. Again, remember, we have to protect our children's sleep.

In today's society, we are interfering with a child's ability to fall asleep by keeping them up too late at night when they're already so tired they have trouble settling to fall asleep. We have them engaged in activities such as soccer or basketball or any other sport too late in the evening when they should be getting ready for bed, and we have them doing homework, often stressful homework, in the evening before going to bed. We have to be careful about the stresses impacting our elementary age children and interfering with their sleep.

One of the things that commonly happens, is when parents understand the importance of their child's sleep, they inadvertently create pressure that makes it harder for the children to actually fall asleep. They need to get to sleep by nine. If they're not successful getting to sleep by nine, they begin to get anxious that they're not asleep by nine, and eventually they're up until ten or eleven. It's better to just encourage your children to follow the sleep hygiene steps. If you're going to reward them, reward them for following those steps. If a child is lying quietly, listening to their audio book as part of their sleep habit at nine o'clock, that can be rewarded. We don't have to reward them or pressure them to actually fall asleep.