



the importance of sleep

So your child's a bad sleeper – does it really matter? According to the latest research, it does. Studies all over the world are proving that a sound sleep and a regular bedtime is essential for your child's wellbeing and development.

By Kirsten Taylor*

sleep and child development

Adequate sleep is necessary for optimal child development; in fact, sleep directly impacts on children's physical and mental growth and wellbeing. Sleep is so important in these early years that a 2-year-old child will have (or should have) actually spent more time asleep than awake. As children grow and develop, so do their higher brain functions. Sleep is crucial to the development of these higher cognitive functions of the brain.

In a recent Australian study, children's sleeping patterns were compared with different aspects of child development. Those children with the shortest amounts of sleep had the poorest physical, mental and social functioning scores. Other studies have shown that school-aged children with poor or fragmented sleep were much more likely to have behavioural and learning problems, especially when performing more complex tasks.

poor sleep and behaviour

Is your child more grumpy or aggressive when she's tired? Or have you noticed a link between a period of late nights and your child's bad behaviour? If so, you're not just imagining it. In a Northwestern University study of 500 preschoolers, those who weren't getting enough sleep (less than 10 hours total over 24 hour period) were found to be 25% more likely to misbehave with aggression, oppositional or non-compliant behaviour. Similar aggressive behavioural problems have been found in sleep-deprived older children too.

effects of technology on children's sleep

Children's exposure to screens is ever-increasing as more phone, tablets and large televisions are used in households these days. Apart from the stimulating nature of these devices, they have additional sleep-inhibiting properties. The light emitted from these devices, especially the short wavelength blue light, is close to the peak sensitivity for melatonin suppression. Melatonin is a hormone that is part of the sleep-wake cycle and makes us drowsy. Thus, suppressing melatonin can reduce drowsy effects at night that encourages us to

sleep – and missing this cue means children can miss out on valuable sleep.

So if your child has a TV or computer in their bedroom and isn't sleeping soundly at night (ie, wakes frequently or wakes tired), is having trouble going to sleep or staying up late, you might consider removing the screens from their bedroom. Research has found a direct correlation between a TV and/or computer in a child's bedroom and poorer sleep patterns and reduced sleep quality. Interestingly, The Folkhälsan Research Center in Finland found that this effect was particularly noticeable in boys.

poor sleep and accidental falls

Have you noticed how your child becomes more clumsy when she's tired? In a study of almost 2000 children, researchers found children aged between 3-5 years old were more likely to have accidental falls if they had less sleep than normal in the past 24 hours.

sleep deprivation and obesity

Various studies around the world, including NZ, have also shown a definite link between children who are chronically sleep-deprived and obesity. Essentially, children who sleep less are more at risk of being overweight than those children who get adequate sleep.

adolescence

It's important to remember that it's not just children who need enough sleep. Dr Maria Wong found that those who had sleeping problems in childhood continued to have sleeping problems in adolescence. These adolescents were then more likely to make poor lifestyle choices and have more trouble controlling impulsive behaviour.

how much sleep does my child need?

The results of all these studies highlight the importance of sleep on children's health, development and wellbeing. Although individual sleep requirements vary somewhat,

the National Sleep Foundation has made the following guidelines.

Age	Sleep requirements (hours)
0-2 months	12-18
3-11 months	14-15
1-3 years	12-14
3-5 years	11-13
5-10 years	10-11
10-17 years	8.5-9.25

is your child getting enough?

The best way to work out if your child is getting enough sleep is to monitor how your kids are feeling and behaving. The following behaviours are associated with a lack of sleep:

- Z Sleepy at the wrong time of day
- Z Trouble paying attention during the day
- Z Fall asleep very quickly within a few minutes when given the chance
- Z Paradoxically 'wired' to fall asleep at the wrong time of day e.g. just before dinnertime
- Z Easily frustrated and quickly irritated, tantrums in young children
- Z Children having trouble keeping their impulses in check.

Helping your children sleep

reducing fear and anxiety

Addressing these issues is extremely important and need to be taken seriously as children's cognitive and emotional abilities are still developing.

Tips to help children with night-time fears:

- Z Be available for reassurance and support
- Z Teach them about the difference between fantasy and reality
- Z Reduce daytime stresses to help reduce night time fear
- Z Avoid frightening TV, movies, stories and imagery, including the TV news
- Z Use soft toys for comfort and support
- Z Respond promptly to nightmares. The more quickly you can break the spell of a frightening dream, the more quickly you and your child can get back to sleep
- Z Teach coping skills through role play and superhero stories
- Z Supplement your child with vitamin B6, magnesium, homeopathic remedies and flower essences.

bedtime routines

One of the biggest causes of lack of sleep in children is a lack of priority put on the importance of sleep and the need for an effective, regular bedtime routine.

- Z Establish a regular and consistent pre-bed routine – such as a gentle playtime, a bath or shower, put on pyjamas, brush teeth, read books and have some quality time with your child
- Z Make sure your child's bedroom is comfortable and they love being in it, with comforting toys and/or blankies to make it sleep-inducing and soothing
- Z Invest in a good quality natural fibre bed and bedding
- Z Dehumidify and dust the room regularly
- Z Make sure the room is not too hot or cold, but is dark and quiet
- Z Remove all stimulating activities especially screens or electronic devices at least 1.5 hours before sleep time
- Z Set a regular bedtime (age-appropriate) and stick with it
- Z Have a regular calming bedtime routine with one-on-one time with your child to chat about their day, read books, etc
- Z Teach your child how to do deep, slow breathing from a young age
- Z Once your child is asleep, turn off any night lights.

benefits of good sleep

Ensuring your child sleeps well will have enormous benefits for their development, learning, overall health, immunity, behaviour, as well as their ability to cope with everyday stresses and pressure.

Prioritising children's sleep is an extremely important part of responsible parenting. As well as having the added benefit of more peace for the whole family!

** Kirsten is a Naturopathic sleep specialist who works to support families so that every member gets a better night's sleep.*