



Sleep

Why sleep?



Understanding Boys

Position Papers

Sleep

'During the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, a teenager's sleeping pattern experiences major variation... A large number of adolescents reportedly experience insufficient and ill-timed sleep which directly affects vital functionalities of their waking lives such as the ability to think, perform, feel and interact.'

– Carskadon 2002

Why sleep?

Despite what we might think, when we sleep, our bodies are busy with all sorts of vital activities, including consolidating memories, repairing tissue and synthesising hormones.

Regardless of its cause, we know that sleep deprivation can lead to serious problems, including irritability, fatigue, mood swings, lack of concentration, impaired school performance, stress, anxiety and even depression.

While every child's sleep needs are different, the experts suggest that teenagers need 9–10 hours of sleep each night. Research shows that children and teens who don't get enough sleep face challenges to their:

- health
- safety
- performance
- ability to learn.

According to Melbourne clinical psychologist and MindMatters panelist Andrew Fuller, ensuring that teenagers get adequate sleep is one of the most powerful ways to protect them from depression and other health problems. 'The structures in the brain that support the most powerful anti-depressant, serotonin, are built and re-built between the sixth and the eighth hour of sleep.' He says that getting less than 6 hours of sleep a night can have the same effect as a .05 blood alcohol level.

Helping our boys to establish good sleeping habits from a young age, and reminding them of the importance of sleep, will support their wellbeing in future and help them to achieve success.

What are the experts saying?

- 'Sleep research shows that a teenager needs between 9 and 10 hours of sleep every night. Yet most teens are sleeping only about 7 or 8 hours a night on average. Chronic sleep deprivation can lead to reduced alertness and concentration, poorer academic performance and feelings of sadness and irritability.' (MindMatters 2016)
- 'Adolescents are often sleep-deprived, which may in turn increase vulnerability to stress.' (Fuller)

- ‘According to the National Sleep Foundation, we sleep 20% less than we used to a century ago. Seventy million Americans have a diagnosed sleep disorder – and that’s just the people who actually went to the doctor to get diagnosed.’ (Wells 2015)
- ‘Regularly not getting enough sleep leads to chronic sleep deprivation. This can have dramatic effects on a teenager’s life, impacting their mental wellbeing, increasing their risk of depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. It can also affect academic performance at school.’ (Better Health Channel)
- ‘Teens need between 8–10 hours of nightly sleep to meet their needs and to perform at their best during their waking days. Because their bodies are biologically programmed to stay up late, it can be difficult for teens to get this much rest on a routine basis. The National Sleep Foundation estimates that only about 85 percent of teenagers are sleeping less than 8½ hours a night.’ (Breus 2017)
- ‘In adolescence, the brain is still developing, and sleep is essential to healthy brain development. The brain’s pre-frontal cortex – responsible for complex thinking and decision making, as well as emotional regulation – is among the last areas of the brain to develop, and undergoes significant maturation during teenage years. This part of the brain is especially sensitive to the effects of sleep deprivation.’ (Breus 2017)
- ‘Some of the reasons why many teenagers regularly do not get enough sleep include: hormonal time shift, using screen based devices, hectic after-school schedule, leisure activities, light exposure, vicious circle, social attitudes, sleep disorder.’ (Better Health Channel)
- ‘Insufficient sleep in teens is linked to: cognitive issues (trouble with memory, diminished focus, difficulty learning, poor judgement and decision making), behavioural issues (hyperactivity, aggressiveness, and social withdrawal), emotional issues (irritability and impaired moods, negative attitude, greater risk for depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts), academic and performance issues (lower grades, poor academic performance, tardiness).’ (Breus 2017).



What can I do?

To help your teenage son get a good night's sleep, encourage him to...

- understand the importance of sleep. You can do this by talking to him about it and modelling the behaviour yourself
- establish a pre-sleep ritual or routine. Dr Greg Wells suggests starting a routine an hour before bed to decompress and relax. Your son might do this by, for example, reading, practising relaxation or mediation, or taking a warm bath
- eat dinner at least 2 hours before going to bed
- avoid rich foods and caffeine after 5pm, and decrease sugar in his diet
- eat foods containing magnesium and vitamin B6 (leafy greens, spinach, almonds, bananas, poultry, milk and dairy, herbal tea) – these help to regulate the nervous system
- keep his bedroom tech-free and avoid phones, tablets and TV prior to bedtime
- get out of bed at the same time every morning
- get adequate physical activity during the day
- prioritise sleep over late-night studying. (Research shows that teens who burn the midnight oil with homework are more likely to have trouble with their academic work the next day.)
- use dim lighting at night
- block distracting noise at bedtime
- avoid late nights and naps after 4pm
- have his room at a cool but comfortable temperature.



References

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