

How Much Sleep Does Your Child Need?

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A proper amount of sleep is critical to the overall health and well-being of children. Each child is different, and their sleep needs change as they age.

For children who are used to daytime naps and sleeping in late, the start of a new schedule can be a bit rough. However, establishing a bedtime routine for your child is a helpful tool in maintaining their health and happiness. In addition to providing your child with energy and motivation, sleep can enhance his or her ability to concentrate and maintain energy throughout the day.



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Getting Enough Sleep

For children starting full-day school for the first time, or even older students used to sleeping in, the start of school is an abrupt interruption to their sleep schedules. While giving up nap time and waking up earlier may not be too difficult, going to bed earlier may cause the most resistance. Changing bedtimes gradually – 15 or 20 minutes every few days – is usually easier than suddenly asking your child to go to bed two hours earlier.

Children require different amounts of sleep during different phases of their development. Generally, pre-schoolers and school-age children need 10 to 12 hours of sleep per day. Children under 3 typically require a nap during the day as part of their total hours of sleep. As children grow, their sleep requirements decrease. By the time your child is a teen, sleep requirements are only slightly more than those of an adult, requiring about 9 hours a day.

Remember, if your child was getting 10-11 hours of sleep a day during summer months (including sleeping in late and taking naps) he or she still needs the same number of hours once school starts. Lack of sleep can have many side effects including poor concentration, physical performance, and irritability, all of which decrease his or her performance at school. If your child is not getting adequate sleep, you may notice symptoms such as:

- short attention spans
- unusually low energy levels
- being overly sensitive or emotional (tearful, touchy, defensive, or impatient).

If your child’s behavior indicates that he or she is not getting enough sleep, try moving bedtime to an earlier time until you find what works best for your child.

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Bedtime Routine

Creating a bedtime routine is essential to avoiding bedtime battles and helping your child fall asleep easily. Rather than waiting until he or she is completely exhausted, establish a set time and stick to it. Often, it's helpful to begin the bedtime routine with a "winding-down" activity such as a warm bath or story time. This allows your child to slow down both physically and mentally. TV and video games can stimulate a child so it's best to avoid these activities right before bed.

Other factors to consider

Keep in mind that daytime sleepiness and nighttime restlessness can also be influenced by certain medications. Some attention-deficit/hyperactivity and asthma medications may interfere with nighttime rest, and therefore result in daytime drowsiness. Over-the-counter cold medications may have a similar effect. Consult your child's physician if you think a medication may be impacting his or her sleep, or if a sleep problem persists past your comfort level.

Although often blamed on "lack of sleep," your child's ability to concentrate and overall mood may also be greatly impacted by his or her diet. Foods high in sugar and caffeine can adversely impact your child's ability to concentrate and get a full night's rest, as well as cause undesired mood swings. Fruits, yogurt, and granola bars are excellent alternatives to chips and cookies. Drinks that are 100% juice (no caffeine, no added sugars), milk with a school lunch, or even water in a fun bottle are healthier choices as well. Caffeinated beverages and foods high in sugar may also give your child a short-lived energy boost, so it's best to avoid these foods before bedtime.

Helping your child develop good sleeping habits will only enhance his or her ability to perform well at school. Sleep allows the body to relax and rejuvenate, and is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. Establishing a routine, sticking to it, and considering diet choices will prepare your child for success each day at school.



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