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# Your child's sleep affects their brain

## Better sleep can lead to improvements at home and school



Sleep is vital for everyone's brain health — but especially for growing and developing kids. Without enough sleep, certain cognitive (brain) functions may not work as effectively as they otherwise could.

"Sleep is important for brain health in general," says Alice Ann Holland, Ph.D., ABPP, a board-certified neuropsychologist and the Research Director of the Neuropsychology Service at Children's Health<sup>SM</sup>. "If you don't get enough sleep, you can see negative effects on attention and emotional regulation."

Children who aren't sleeping enough may have trouble paying attention in school. They may start to have behavior problems, such as tantrums or extreme reactions to small events, at both school and home.

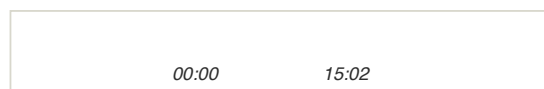
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"Sleep is important for emotional regulation," Dr. Holland says. "The brain needs enough 'brainpower' to be able to control those automatic, knee jerk, emotional reactions. Kids without enough sleep may have trouble with that and may tend to be more irritable."

Beyond emotions, Dr. Holland says poor sleep can make memory less effective and hurt your child's ability to learn. Sleep-deprived children also may be less alert and more easily distracted, which can put teens who are driving at a higher risk for accidents.

### Related podcast

Learn more about how to get your child to sleep by listening to the Children's Health Checkup podcast.



## How much sleep does your child need?

To optimize your child's brain function, make sure they get the amount of sleep their brain needs. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, your child should sleep:

- 12 to 16 hours per day (including naps) between ages 4 months and 12 months
- 11 to 14 hours per day (including naps) between ages 1 and 2
- 10 to 13 hours per day (including naps) between ages 3 and 5
- 9 to 12 hours per day between ages 6 and 12
- 8 to 10 hours per day between ages 13 and 18

These guidelines are meant to promote optimal health in kids, giving their growing brains and bodies time to recharge.

But it can be difficult to tell if your child is getting the right amount of sleep. If you put your child to bed at the right time to get enough sleep relative to their wake-up time, but they have trouble falling asleep, your child is missing out on important rest. A child who can't fall asleep or wakes up often during the night may have a sleep disorder, or this may simply be indicative of anxiety. Fear of the dark and/or fear of having nightmares are common issues related to poor sleep for young children in particular.

"There are some things to look for beyond just hours in bed," says Dr. Holland. "Kids who aren't sleeping well may take more naps than typical for their age. They may have trouble focusing in school due to fatigue or drowsiness. It can be helpful to ask teachers if they notice your child seeming sleepy during the school day. Irritability also can be a sign of poor sleep."

## How to help your child get enough sleep

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If you think your child isn't getting enough sleep, the first step is to talk to them about their sleep experience. Ask how long it takes them to fall asleep, how often they wake up in the middle of the night and how long they are awake when they do wake up. Younger children may not be able to accurately answer these questions, so quietly checking on your child or setting up a video monitor in their room may help you determine if any issues are occurring.

If your child is having trouble falling asleep, try the following tips to help them rest better:

1. **Move up bedtime.** Set your child's bedtime earlier to ensure they fall asleep when they should.
2. **Establish a routine.** Follow a regular bedtime routine – such as taking a bath, brushing teeth and then reading (alone or with a parent, depending on the child's age) for a short period of time. A routine can be calming for children who are anxious about bedtime and can help your child's body feel prepared for sleep.
3. **Avoid screens prior to bedtime.** Lights from electronic screens within a couple hours of bedtime can disrupt the brain's circadian rhythms and contribute to sleep difficulties by tricking the brain into thinking it should still be awake. Bedtime reading should not be done on an electronic screen such as an e-reader.
4. **Create a good sleep environment.** The right sleep environment can help your child fall asleep and stay asleep. Your child's bedroom should be:
  - Dark, with only one dim nightlight if necessary
  - Cool, ideally below 74 degrees
  - Quiet, with only a small amount of white noise (e.g., a fan), if necessary
  - Screen-free, including televisions, smartphones, computers and tablets
5. **Avoid late-night treats.** A bedtime snack or drink could be interfering with your child's ability to sleep. Avoid sugary foods for a couple of hours before bedtime to help him/her rest easier. Caffeinated drinks should not be consumed within six hours of bedtime.



*Sleep is vital for everyone's brain health – especially growing kids. See recommended sleep guidelines and five tips for better sleep from experts @Childrens.*

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Learn more

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If your child has trouble sleeping, talk to your pediatrician or a sleep specialist. The Children's Health Sleep Disorders Center is the largest program in North Texas accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Learn more about our sleep program, which treats all forms of pediatric and adolescent sleep disorders.

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