Sleep Deprivation
In Children and Youth

Just as a fatigued adult is accident prone, children lacking sleep are judgment impaired and more likely to make mistakes and bad decisions. Lack of sleep affects a child’s school performance and may be linked to an increased risk of emotional problems such as depression.

School-age children need between 9 and 12 hours of sleep nightly. Parents can gauge if a child of this age is getting the proper sleep if the child can:

- Fall asleep within 15 to 30 minutes.
- Wake up easily at the time they need to get up without parents constantly bugging them to get up.
- Stay awake and alert all day without a daytime nap.

Sleep deprived children speed up rather than slow down, particularly before bedtime. They tend to be moody, irritable, exploding at slight provocation. Often groggy in the morning and hard to wake, they demonstrate over-activity and hyperactivity.

Teens need about nine to 10 hours of sleep at a time in their life when they are unlikely to get that amount. Sleep cycles for this age group are affected by physical, behavioral and emotional changes that occur in adolescence. Chronically sleep-deprived teenagers are more likely to have problems with impulse control, which can lead to risky behaviors. Sleep problems in teenagers are associated with increased risk of disorders such as depression and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Parent should also note that some medications used to treat ADHD, depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) can cause insomnia.

Amounts of sleep often correlate to grades in middle and high school with lower grades resulting from less sleep. Signs of sleep deprivation in teens include difficulty waking in the morning, irritability late in the day, falling asleep during quiet times in the day and sleeping for extra long periods on the weekends.

Children adopted from orphanages or from long term foster care may demonstrate sleep difficulties when joining their new adoptive families. As much information as possible about sleep patterns needs to follow the child into the new home as insight into the child’s level of fear and anxiety. Parents will need to realize that sleep disturbances often accompany grieving with the child either sleeping excessively or not sleeping. Nightmares may be frequent and are common with children separated from care-givers. Children need to know that it is acceptable for them to miss the family they just left. When not given this permission, children may continue to miss sleep or to act out.

Here are some steps that parents can take to ensure that children and teens are getting proper amounts of sleep:

- Help your teen balance sleep needs with school, work and their social life. Encourage them to make difficult choices when it is necessary to cut back on a job, time with friends and school activities in deference to sleep.

- Research by Dr. Mary Carskadon, a sleep researcher at Brown University in 1997, shows that
late school starts benefit the sleep cycle of pre-teens and teens. Encourage your child’s school district to pay attention to such research. Higher grades and reduced negative feelings among this age group have been found to result from a later starting time at school.

- Seek the opinion of a sleep expert if you think your child may have a sleep disorder. Sleepiness can be a sign of serious but treatable sleep disorders such as narcolepsy, sleep apnea or restless legs syndrome.

- A sleep diary kept for several weeks can provide clues about sleep habits and can be used to measure progress.

- Plan ahead during summer and vacations, easing back into “school time” since this transition can take several days to several weeks to complete.

- Establish a home environment that promotes healthy sleep habits with quiet evening times that are free of loud music and bright lighting. Limit your child’s use of the computer, radio, TV, phone or instant messaging close to bedtime.

- These devices in the bedroom can disrupt sleep.

- While depression and anxiety can contribute to insomnia, recent research has shown that insomnia often precedes the first episode of depression or of a relapse. Physicians are looking more closely at the importance of solving sleep problems in order to eliminate or decrease the severity of anxiety or emerging depression.

- Teens often cannot fall asleep until late due to their circadian rhythm. An early bedtime does not ensure sleep.

- Not all children need a quiet or darkened room to fall asleep, so gauge individual preferences in children and adolescents. If white noise helps bring sleep for one child, while another cannot fall asleep with any noise, accommodate those differences.

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RESOURCES

_A Clinical Guide to Sleep Disorders in Children and Adolescents_

_The Floppy Sleep Game Book: A Proven 4-Week Plan to get Your Child to Sleep_
by Patti Teel, is designed to help young children fall asleep on their own. It includes relaxation exercises to allow parents to customize a bedtime routine to promote sleep, 2005.

_How to Sleep Soundly Tonight: 250 Simple and Natural Ways to Prevent Sleeplessness_

_Sleepless in America: Is Your Child Misbehaving or Missing Sleep_
by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, 2006.

_Take Charge of your Child’s Sleep: The All-in-one Resource for Solving Sleep Problems in Kids and Teens_
by Jodi Mindell and Judith Owens, 2005._