

Teenagers and Sleep

This is not the first time we have written about sleep, but it is an issue that raises its head regularly among the students we work with at school. Parents express their concerns about their daughter's sleep habits to us, and the girls themselves often admit that they are having trouble sleeping.

It is quite normal for sleep habits to begin to change in adolescence. This is partly about your child's desire to stay up a bit later, but more importantly it signals the changes that are beginning to occur in the teenage brain. The adolescent brain begins to secrete melatonin (the sleep inducing hormone triggered by darkness) later in the night. This also explains why they want/need to stay in bed longer in the morning. Their sleep cycle is shifting. They may go to bed at a reasonable time, want to sleep, but just can't. It may be helpful for you – and for them – to know this is normal and doesn't represent anything untoward. Ideally teenagers need approximately nine hours sleep per night. This is even more than most adults, but it is not just about the length of time spent sleeping that is important. Quality of sleep and sleep routine also play an important role.

There would be very few parents amongst us who do not worry about our daughter's screen time and the impact this has on their sleep. There is a little catch-22 happening here. Young people spend time on their screens because they are feeling more wakeful in the evenings, and they are feeling more wakeful in the evenings because they spend a lot of time on their screens. It is not just about the light either. Screen time in the evenings often involves chatting with and texting friends, discussing issues of the day, keeping them alert and sometimes exacerbating anxiety.

If you are aware that your daughter is awake late into the night, or that she is not sleeping well, there are some strategies you can introduce that may help her get to sleep a little more easily.

The first and obvious one is to encourage her, as best you can, to reduce her screen time before bed. It will take a good half an hour after turning off the screen before sleep will easily come. Boundaries around screen time are best established when your children are young, but most teenagers know that screen time late at night isn't good. It may help to engage them in the making of the rules. Work out together what will work best. This will make rules easier to enforce.

Encourage a regular bed time. Going to bed and getting up at the same time every day helps cement the wake sleep cycle (circadian rhythm). This means a deeper more restful sleep at night and a more wakeful and attentive day. There will often be reasons to stay up late and we all appreciate a sleep in but encourage your child to get up when they wake up, and not to vary going to bed and getting up times by more than two hours.

Encourage a wind-down time before bed. A story (for the young ones), a quiet chat with Mum or Dad and a warm drink (not coffee), a warm shower, lights dimmed or even listening to quiet music all help.

Monitor their intake of caffeinated drinks. Ideally young people should not be drinking them at all. Coffee is becoming an increasing part of young adults' diets. Educate your children about the effects of caffeine and discourage its consumption, especially in the latter part of the day.

A day at school can be exhausting, but it is the physical tiredness from exercise that best helps us to sleep. Encourage some physical activity each day, but not just before bed time. Create a comfortable, dark and quiet environment for sleep. Children should be warm in bed but the temperature of the room itself should ideally be cooler at night.

Help your daughter assess her weekly schedule if you believe it is too busy, working out what can be shifted or removed.

Encourage an early night on Sunday. A late Sunday night followed by an early start Monday gets the week off on the wrong foot.

We are all different, and it is probably true to say that most teenagers do not get enough sleep. There is no hard and fast rule, but it is important to be alert to changes in sleeping habits, whether it is unusual wakefulness or excessive sleeping. Both can be cause for concern. And yes, there are some medical conditions which can induce insomnia, so if lack of sleep becomes a chronic problem it may be worth a visit to the doctor. Excessive tiredness can also cause other health issues that may impact on their mental health. Finally, we are always happy to talk about and tailor specific strategies for your daughter at school.

The following articles were useful in the preparation of this article and make good further reading:

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/teenagers-and-sleep>
http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/sleep_early_teens.html/context/1069

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver
SMC Counsellors
gbath@smc.tas.edu.au
amaver@smc.tas.edu.au