Are They Misbehaving or Missing Sleep?

Sleep Better for Better Behavior

Eye-opening facts about babies, children, and sleep
and advice on how to get everyone snoozing soundly.

As a parent, you've probably been craving sleep since the minute your first child was born. But did you ever wonder if your children are getting enough shut eye? According to recent reports, chronic sleep deprivation is creeping downward on the age scale, and it's negatively affecting everything from children's ability to learn to their behavior. In her book, Sleepless in America: Practical Strategies to Help Your Family Get the Sleep It Deserves, child development and education expert Mary Sheedy Kurcinka discusses how lack of sleep affects the whole family.

Scholastic's Parent & Child magazine editors talked to Kurcinka to learn more.

P&C: How much sleep do children need?

Kurcinka: In the first year, infants need 14 to 18 hours out of 24. As a rule, think 10 hours at night and the remainder during daytime naps. Toddlers need 13 hours; up to about 18 or 19 months, they should still be getting two naps a day and 10 hours at night. Many parents report that their preschoolers have stopped napping, but many probably still need at least a rest during the day. Statistics show that preschool-age children who go for 8 to 9 hours without rest are 86 percent more likely than kids who do nap to end up in the emergency room.
P&C: What is the link between lack of sleep and a child's behavior?

Kurcinka: A young child who is chronically sleep-deprived has trouble managing his emotions. He might have an explosive temper, easily hurt feelings, or have a lack of patience. He may be clumsy and accident-prone, and will also be more wired and frenzied in play. An overtired child in school may have trouble focusing and paying attention in class. He may become forgetful and make silly mistakes. He also may talk excessively and constantly bug you, siblings, and classmates — all of which are ways he is trying to stimulate himself and regain focus. In social situations, an overtired child might have more conflicts with other kids, or be bossy, demanding, and not open to guidance.

THE BEDTIME ROUTINE YOU NEED TO START TONIGHT

P&C: That sounds a lot like attention deficit disorder.

Kurcinka: It does — and in fact, 20 to 25 percent of kids with ADD may also have a sleep disorder. This is not to say that all children diagnosed with ADD or ADHD are actually sleep-deprived, but it would be wise, when we see that sort of behavior, to look first at how much sleep that child gets. Improving sleep could, in fact, improve behavior, as well as focus and school performance.

P&C: How can you get your child on track for more sleep?

Kurcinka: I like to stay that good nighttime sleep starts in the morning. Parents make decisions for their children all day that will affect how well they sleep at night. Look at what you're doing. Are you letting your child watch too much TV? Are you giving him caffeinated soda with lunch? Are you compromising your baby or toddler's nap schedule so you can get errands done? Are you letting your preschooler skip naps too soon? Innocent choices like these all challenge the quality of nighttime sleep.

P&C: What is your advice for preschoolers and older children who might not take naps?

Kurcinka: Older children may not nap anymore, but that doesn't mean they don't need to sleep or at least rest during the day. While you certainly can't force a child to sleep, you can initiate a rest or siesta time at your house. Take a look at some preschools; they often have a scheduled rest time in the middle of the day. And, of course, the big surprise is that many kids who don't nap at home will fall asleep during rest time at school. Tell your child that, during rest time, she can do whatever she likes as long as it's quiet and solitary — so no TV, no videos or computer games, and no playdates. She can read — or you can read together. She can do puzzles or color. If she's truly sleepy, she'll have the opportunity to fall asleep. If you were at the mall or on a playdate, she wouldn't fall asleep, but if she dozes off during quiet time, that's your cue that she actually needs to sleep.

HOW TO GET A CHILD TO SLEEP, FAST

P&C: You've said that even babies and toddlers may not be getting enough sleep. But what about times you try to put the baby down, and he seems more jumpy than sleepy?

Kurcinka: That child is probably already overtired. Parents don't always recognize the signs of tiredness in their baby or toddler, or they misread or ignore sleepy cues, like rubbing their eyes or getting cranky or fussy. When that happens, they miss the sleep window, a period of time when it's relatively easy to get a baby to fall asleep. When a baby or child stays awake past that window, he gets wired, hopped up, and then can't easily drop off. His behavior seems to say, "I'm not sleepy," when the opposite is true. Then, the mistake gets

compounded when the parents think the baby will sleep later the next day to make up for the lost sleep, and that doesn't happen. Poor sleep is a cumulative problem; the less you sleep one day, the less you sleep the next.

For that reason, I advise parents to be vigilant about finding their child's sleep window and sticking to it as much as possible. That means if your baby is sleepy at a certain time each afternoon, you should be sure to be at home and ready to put him down. Don't run errands, schedule playdates, or attend baby classes. When parents say that these classes are important for their child's development, I counter by saying that nothing is more important for maximizing your baby's brain development than sleep.

P&C: A recent study reports that TV viewing by infants and toddlers may be associated with irregular sleep. What do you think about this?

Kurcinka: It's true. When babies and young children watch TV, a couple of things happen. First, obviously, it's stimulating to watch TV. But over-exposure to light is also a problem. When a baby watches TV in the evening, her body clock can be tricked by the lights coming from the television into thinking it is daytime. For older children, the issue often becomes fighting to stay awake to watch the end of a show. Then, they miss that sleep window and their body secretes cortisol, a stress hormone that keeps them awake. And again, you have that cumulative problem of lack of sleep leading to less sleep, and so on.