

RASNC

Regional Adolescent
Sleep Needs Coalition

Managing Adolescent Sleep in an Evolving Pandemic Culture

Over the past several months, we, as both psychologists and parents, have witnessed firsthand distance learning influences on adolescent sleep patterns:

- freedom from early alarms
- variable virtual start-times on school days
- less structured and inconsistent academic schedules
- restrictions and/or changes in social, physical, and extra-curricular activities
- social/emotional adjustments
- newfound stressors and/or even stress relief
- changes in meal-timing and dietary choices
- increased dependence on technology for social engagement, entertainment, and academics

One silver lining associated with distance learning is that many students have been able to -- finally -- satisfy their biological sleep needs, sleep according to their biologically preferred circadian rhythm, and experience more restfulness. One downside is that others may have succumbed to over-sleeping, have slept in response to boredom or depressed mood, and/or foregone any sleep routine.

We can't help but contemplate what will happen in the upcoming weeks and months as students transition to Fall schooling. The schedules could include any number of benefits and/or challenges to sleep: consistent or varied start-times for each school day; early or late (i.e., 8:30 am or after) start times; all in-person, all online, or hybrid instruction; and/or changes to any of these with little notice.

The good news is that sleep can be re-regulated via good habits, and obtaining healthy sleep can be instrumental for academic success, as well as a critical driver of physical and emotional well-being. Toward that end, we have compiled a number of strategies to guide our teens toward obtaining optimal sleep health - no matter what school timing, venue, or platform your teen encounters this Fall.

Recommendations for Adolescent Sleep as Back-to-School Schedules Evolve

1. Make sleep a priority! Sleep is as critical to health as diet and exercise. Empower adolescents to make informed choices about their sleep. Teens need 8-10 hrs/night. On average, adults need between 7-9 hrs; children ages 6-13 need between 9-11 hrs (*National Sleep Foundation*).
2. Establish and keep a consistent sleep-wake schedule, *even in the absence of a regular school schedule, anchored around the earliest requisite wake-time*. Avoid excessive over-sleeping on non-school, late-start days/weekends (e.g., vary wake-up time by only one hour).
3. Keep the bedroom environment as cool, dark and quiet as possible. The body and the brain need to cool down in order to achieve restful sleep. Elimination of light (especially blue-light sources) in the bedroom will allow for the natural production of a sleep hormone (melatonin) and a noise-free environment will enhance the depth of sleep. In some cases, a person may prefer white noise (e.g., a fan or white noise machine) to help them get to sleep.
4. Unplug at night: set electronic curfews (whenever possible, at least 30, ideally 60, minutes before bedtime); keep phones and devices in a central location outside the bedroom. Use an alarm clock instead of an alarm on a cell phone. If devices must be used in the evening, make sure the brightness is turned down and the display is shifted to eliminate blue hues. "Night Shift" mode can be used on a smart phone, or other programs can be used on computers to shift to more yellow hues (*"Nocturne" for Macs or justgetflux.com for PCs*). Orange-colored glasses with Spectrum Control Technology (SCT) can also be used to filter blue light when working on the computer.
5. Select activities to help the brain and the body to wind down before sleep. Listening to music, meditation, yoga, prayers, reading an old-fashioned book (but nothing too stimulating!) can all help sleep to occur. A warm shower or bath several hours before bedtime may also promote relaxation. The use of aromatherapy (if there is not a problem with allergies) can be beneficial.
6. Use caffeinated beverages or foods (e.g., coffee, tea, soda, energy drinks, chocolate) judiciously during the daytime. These substances will act as "quick fixes" to counter sleepiness during the daytime, but they can interfere with sleep quality and duration. For teens, nicotine should also be avoided since it is a powerful stimulant and will interfere with sleep.
7. Adjust the sleep schedule several weeks before school starts. If the student's "normal" sleep-wake schedule has been delayed during the distance learning period, start to shift the schedule to earlier times by progressively moving the wake-up time and in-bed time **several weeks** before school is set to reopen. For the first two days, set the wake-up time one hour earlier than their typical hour of awakening. **Immediately** upon awakening, get exposure to natural sunlight for at least 30 minutes. Sunglasses should not be worn upon awakening.* The next 2 days, allow for the same wake-up time, but shift the in-bed time by one hour earlier. Every two days, shift the in-bed time and wake-up time by one hour earlier. By the end of one week to two weeks, the sleep-wake pattern should be shifted to a more acceptable schedule. During the evening hours, if there is still sufficient sunlight (e.g., May-October), wear dark sunglasses when outdoors to block light stimulation for several hours prior to bedtime. *Note: If available, a light box would provide a more consistent intensity of light (directions for use of light box should be strictly followed).
8. Attend to, monitor, and manage stress, anxiety, and sad mood. All these factors can negatively impact sleep-wake patterns. Conversely, poor sleep can also increase the prevalence of symptoms of anxiety and depression. As you and your child shift the sleep schedule and prepare for the many changes in routine that accompany the start of the school year, some anxiety, irritability, or sadness is natural as your child's brain and body adjusts. For most children, the changes in mood will be temporary and give way to excitement as the shift in sleep schedule is achieved and the school year gets underway. If the sadness or anxiety is pervasive (all day, most of the day) and persistent (2 full weeks for sadness and several months for anxiety), consider reaching out to a school counselor to discuss your concerns and whether a referral to a mental health professional is indicated.