

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

Does Your Kid Have Trouble Sleeping? This Study Tells You What NOT to Do

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Are your kids having trouble sleeping? Well, you are not alone. Children's sleeplessness is becoming a big problem around the world.

New data from NHS England, a branch of England's Department of Health, indicates that the number of British children under age 14 being treated at hospitals for sleep disorders has tripled over the past 10 years. In fact, more than 8,000 children under 14 were admitted to hospitals in 2016 with their primary diagnosis being a sleep disorder. This rate is up from under 3,000 in 2006. The number has steadily increased each year for nearly two decades.

Besides keeping a child's temper in balance, sleep provides so many essential benefits for our growing children. While asleep, children process and absorb what they have learned. Some studies have even found that sleep improves a child's intelligence and memory. Sleep also allows a child's body to recover and repair itself, and of course to grow. Sleep plays a big role in managing mood and lack of sleep can lead to an increase in negative behaviors like anxiety, impatience, aggression, irritability, and poor school performance. It has also been linked to a greater risk of obesity and a weak immune system.

Why are kids having so much trouble sleeping these days? Researchers believe that a key contributor to the increase in sleep problems is technology use, especially before bedtime. The blue light emitted by smartphones, televisions, tablets, and other devices reduces the natural production of melatonin, the hormone that controls our sleep/wake cycle or circadian rhythm.

Additional factors include later bedtimes in busy working households, the consumption of beverages high in sugar and caffeine, and poor diet.

One of the problematic outcomes of this increase in sleep disorders is that large numbers of children are now being put on medications to manage their sleep issues. The prescription of the common sleep medication, melatonin, has risen by ten times for children. Figures show the number of prescriptions in England for melatonin rose to nearly 600,000 in 2015. Curiously, melatonin is only licensed as a treatment only for people over 55, but is commonly prescribed to younger people.

Experts, such as therapists at the [Children’s Sleep Charity](#), warn parents to not rely on medication to manage children’s sleep challenges. Instead, they should focus on some simple [bedtime routine adjustments](#) to help their children sleep more soundly.

With regard to sleep medication, another study published in February 2017 by Johns Hopkins Medicine determined that the chemical changes that occur in our brain cells while we sleep are crucial for learning, and sleeping pills may ruin that process. By studying mice, scientists at Johns Hopkins found evidence that a key purpose of sleep is to recharge our brains so that we are ready to learn and remember more effectively when we wake. This sleep break, in a sense, allows our brain to solidify the lessons we learned and then use that new information the next day. Our brain can only store a certain amount of information before it needs to recalibrate.

The researchers also discovered several important molecules that aid in this recalibration process. They found evidence that sleep deprivation, sleep disorders, and sleeping pills can interfere with this important process. There is a critical process that occurs while we sleep, and sleeping pills can prevent our brain from functioning properly while we sleep. Therefore, it is so important that parents use behavioral changes as opposed to medication to help our children sleep better.



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