_HEALTH AND SAFETY _HOUSEHOLD, WELLNESS, LIFESTYLE

Do Naps Make Kids Smarter?

BY
Sandi Schwartz

POSTED ON
January 3, 2017 (January 3, 2017)

1K 100

When my children were infants and toddlers, nap time was a sacred part of the day – mainly because it gave me a much-needed break. I scheduled meals, playdates, mommy and me classes, and errands around their naps.

I dealt with plenty of pushback from friends and relatives for sticking to this schedule. They didn't understand why I had to leave early or arrive late to some events. Deep down I knew that it was best for my children – they needed that nap or they'd be cranky, which would ultimately lead to chaos later in the day.

But another secret to my napping obsession was that I had read how naps can actually make kids smarter. What parent doesn't want to do everything possible to help their kid get ahead in life, right?

The science of napping

The study that caught my attention was released in 2010 by University of Arizona. It found that babies who nap are more likely to show an advanced level of learning known as "abstraction." This is the ability to identify a pattern in information. Naps actually help the brain retain new information more effectively, allowing infants to learn more about their surroundings.

During this study, researchers played the same phrase from a made-up language to 48 15-month-olds over and over again until they were familiar with it. Testing showed that toddlers who slept within four to eight hours of hearing the phrase displayed more abstract learning. This was not the case for children who did not take a nap within the same time frame.

Why does this happen? Infants have mostly REM sleep, which involves intense dreaming as a result of heightened brain activity. Children need to experience REM sleep within a reasonable amount of time after learning new information in order to process it. If they don't sleep within four to eight hours, they will not be able to retain as much information.

Over the last several years, additional studies have continued to link napping with better memory and other learning skills.

In 2012, scientists at the University of Colorado Boulder investigated the effects of naps on cognitive responses in two- and three-year-olds. They found that children who did not nap consistently did not learn and solve problems as well as those who napped.

Next, the University of Massachusetts Amherst released findings in 2013 that showed how a midday nap plays a crucial role in improving memory and learning in preschoolers. This boost was not found after a night of sleep if kids did not have a daytime nap.

The researchers studied more than 40 preschoolers at six different schools. They conducted two different experiments: the first one focused on a memory game and the second one involved observing brain activity of children during nap time.

In the first experiment, children played a memory matching game using various pictures very similar to the Memory board game we play with our kids. Every child learned the game at the same time in the morning. Researchers then split the children into two groups. One group took naps lasting an average of 75 minutes and the other group stayed awake. Then the children were asked to play the memory game again.

They found that daytime naps were associated with significantly greater memory recall. Skipping the nap led to a 10 percent decrease in the children's accuracy in the memory game. Also, the children who performed best on the memory game had consistent daytime naps.

Scientists believe that memories are processed during sleep in a way that makes it easier for the brain to access and retrieve information later. In order to make room for new memories, the brain continues to work while we sleep, processing what we learn into long-term storage to free up space for new information.

To confirm the findings from the first experiment, researchers then observed brain activity of a different group of preschool children while they napped. They found an increase in the density of sleep spindles, which are bursts of electrical activity in the brain believed to play a role in long-term memory. Researchers determined that an increase in sleep spindle density of kids who napped was linked to better memory skills.

Finally, in 2015 researchers from the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom reported a link between infant napping and memory skills. After studying over 200 young children, they concluded that daytime naps of 30 minutes or more help infants retain and remember new behaviors.

They tested whether daytime sleep after learning helped babies remember new skills more effectively. The study focused on 216 healthy six- to 12-month-old infants. The children were shown how to remove and manipulate a mitten from a hand puppet and were given the opportunity to demonstrate these actions after four and 24 hours.

Half of the babies slept within four hours of learning, while the rest either had no sleep or napped for fewer than 30 minutes. Only the infants who napped after the learning activity remembered what they learned, while those who did not nap showed no evidence of remembering the new behavior. In a nutshell, they found that those who sleep after learning are able to grasp the information better. Therefore, the researchers suggest that the best time to learn may be just before kids go to sleep.

How these finding impact nap time

Now that we know from several studies that naps enhance our children's ability to learn and retain information, what changes can we make in how we parent?

Train your kids to nap from the very beginning. In order to get your children used to napping, set a routine for them from a very young age.

Make naps a priority. Don't succumb to peer pressure when friends and family give you a hard time about your children's naps. Build naps into your family's schedule and gently explain to people the importance of your children taking that break during the day to recharge their batteries.

Choose daycares and preschools that include nap time. In order for young children to function and learn at the optimal level, they really need a nap even while at school. Many schools are eliminating naps to make room for more curriculum. If your school doesn't include a time for napping, consider sharing the science with them about the educational benefits of naps.

Read before nap time. The research shows that children grasp material better just before they fall asleep, so try to make a habit of reading to them before nap time as long as they aren't too cranky.

1K 100

TAGGED IN

Oldie but Goodie

More Recommendations for You

Conducting These 3 "Mom Audits" Made Me a Better Parent

Breadwinning Mothers Carry the Mental Load at Home

How to Get Your Kids to Listen

NEWSLETTER

YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

Interesting stories for parents from all over the internet.

Submit

Sandi Schwartz

0 Comments Parent.co Sandi Schwartz

Recommend Share Sort by Best

Start the discussion…

Be the first to comment.

Subscribe Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd Privacy