

Lack of sleep akin to behaviour disorder

January 22, 2010 Comments 8 ☆ Read later

Paula Goodyer

Sleep deprivation can affect a child's mood, behaviour and academic performance, writes Paula Goodyer.

Tweet 0 Recommend 46 Share 0 in Share Pin it submit
Email article Print Reprints & permissions



Lack of sleep can affect many aspects of a child's life.

What's the difference between a child who's overtired and one with a behaviour disorder? Not a lot, says sleep specialist Dr Chris Seton, recalling a US experiment in which 50 children with ADHD were put together in a hall with 50 sleep deprived children – and sleep physicians and ADHD experts were asked to tell them apart.

"Most of them couldn't do it – there was one specialist who managed to identify 62 per cent of children accurately, but his was the highest score," says Seton who works with the Sleep Disorders Clinic at Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney.

"A tired five-year-old and a five-year-old with ADHD can both act in the same way. There's probably a common pathway, but so far researchers have been unable to find what it is."

But he has no doubt that increasing numbers of Australian children are sleep deprived – and worse off for it. While some research links childhood obesity to lack of sleep, there's stronger evidence that children's behaviour, academic performance and mood are impaired by chronic lack of sleep, says Seton who believes electronic media and mobile phone use take much of the blame.

"Texting is worse than talking on the phone because kids stay awake waiting for the next message. Although we don't have good figures on this in Australia, a study of 13-year-olds in the US that included checking mobile phone records, found that 45 per cent of them used their phones after 3am," he says, urging parents to be more assertive about keeping computers and TVs out of children's bedrooms, and making it a rule that mobiles stay on the kitchen bench until morning.

How much sleep at what age?

Seton says the best way to judge how much sleep a child needs is to assess whether it's "enough for them to wake spontaneously – meaning without an alarm clock - on most mornings and avoid tiredness during the day at least until the last hour before bedtime".

Advertisement

Related Coverage

- How to beat the first-day blues 1
- School lunches - finding the right balance 11

Most popular

- The hidden truth about exercise 67
- Is Summer Land's memoir Summerlandish: Do As I Say, ...
- Meet Georgina McConnell the bodybuilding teen 45
- Beauty business blooms for Rose Porteous 7
- Changing gears 23

Photo Galleries

 Celebrity red carpet watch	 Father's Day gift guide	 Celebrity Red Carpet Watch
 Collette Dinnigan's Resort 2013 show	 Celebrity Red Carpet Watch	 Nicole May Jackson and Aleksey Djamirze

Featured advertisers

As a guide:

- Preschoolers: 12 hours' sleep in a 24-hour period.
- Primary schoolchildren: nine-11 hours.
- 12- to 17-year-olds: nine-10 hours.

But these are averages from which some children may vary, Seton says.

Rewards and routines

Recently the parent of a seven-year-old was referred to Seton because her son's attachment to Nintendo kept him awake until 11pm.

When Seton suggested strategies such as removing access to the game in the evenings, then rewarding him with Nintendo time during the day if his sleep improved, the boy's mother said this was impossible. Her son was addicted, she said, and asked if Seton could prescribe medication.

While this is the pointy end of parents losing their grip over children's sleep routines, Seton estimates he'd see a similar situation once each month.

But while technology is one issue that's eroding children's sleep, so are tightly packed schedules that make for later bedtimes as well as early morning starts, says Seton who sees an increasing trend for primary schoolchildren – not just high school students - to have extra-curricular activities before their school day begins.

There's also the fact that sleep's contribution to general health and wellbeing has slipped off the public radar.

"What we have in its place is an idea that functioning on too little sleep is heroic, a badge of courage," Seton laments. "Sleep deprivation has become normalised, and ideally we need a public health campaign to re-educate people about the value of sleep and to give parents guidelines to help them get their children to sleep."

The adolescent saboteur

For 20 per cent of adolescents the sleep saboteur is not so much electronic, but a glitch in their body clocks. It's a problem called delayed sleep phasing in which they have a circadian rhythm of 25 to 27 hours, instead of the typical 24 hours, Seton explains.

For them, the surge of melatonin, the "sleep hormone" that helps us feel drowsy doesn't kick in until 11pm or later – and it's a condition that can run in families. About 80 per cent of his patients have a parent with the same problem.

"But it's possible to treat it by following a pre-bedtime ritual that helps cue the body for sleep and which gradually resets the teenagers' internal clock to help them sleep better," he says.

Seton's advice for any parent who's concerned about their child's sleep is to get help.

"There are sleep clinics at many public hospitals, as well as private clinics. You don't have to be sick to see a doctor."

For more stories like this visit the [Back to School](#) section.

Ads by Google

[Natural ADD/ADHD Relief](#) [Synaptol-for-ADHD.HelloLife.net](#)
Relieve ADD/ADHD Symptoms Fast with Safe & Homeopathic Synaptol®.

[Sign Up For Summer Camp](#) [CampHuntington.com/Catskill_Mt_Area](#)
Camp For Kids & Young Adults With Learning Disabilities For 52 Years.

[Signs Of ADHD](#) [InquireHow.com](#)
Warning: These 5 Symptoms Are Signs You Might Have ADHD. Learn More

Current jobs 

Fleet Leasing Position...
\$80,000 - \$100,000/hr
North Sydney, NSW...
Adecco Services
[View Job](#)

Account Manager | Cust...
-
Sydney Metro, NSW
Bluefin Resources
[View Job](#)

SEO Manager
\$80,000
Sydney CBD, NSW 2000
Ambition Recruit Pty Ltd
[View Job](#)

Learn More [Earn More.](#)

➔ [Master of Social Work](#) ➔ [Graduate Certificate in Project Management](#)

The Vine Music, News & Reviews
Get the latest here

Defence Housing Australia
You don't have to be a defence member to invest with DHA. Find out more.

Compare & Save « 9 of 13 »



GALAXY S4 + 1.5GB Data...\$65/Mth

Spotlight...with 1.5GB of data for \$65/Mth: Mn. Total Cost \$1,560 over 24 months 

Deals powered by WhistleOut 

Horoscopes



Don't get sucked into power games today. Building warm connections with loved ones matters far more than climbing social or

career ladders.

...find out more [here](#)



Advertisement

Recommended

[?]