

March 13, 2007

A wink of sleep

Lack of sleep has a significant impact on our physical, emotional and psychological well-being. **Michael Jones**, an education consultant, explains why sleep loss directly affects our ability to learn and retain information



It's 8:15AM on a school day, and teachers are expecting children to be alert and raring to go. However many children are yawning, listless and low in energy. The reason? The lack of a good night's sleep. We might jump to the conclusion that it is the parents' fault for allowing their children to stay up late.

In some families this is undoubtedly the case, but a closer look is likely to reveal significant problems with sleeping that affect the whole family.

Schools are increasingly taking the lead in supporting families with issues that affect children's well-being and learning, and assisting families to achieve a good night's sleep is as important as promoting healthy eating habits.

What happens when we are asleep and why does sleep loss have such an impact on our

physical, emotional and psychological well-being?

Sleep is a physical necessity and a 'drive', like hunger and thirst, and we cannot do without it. Most adults need at least eight hours' sleep each night, and children considerably more.

Doctors and scientists all agree that regular restful sleep is essential, and their reasons include: allowing our bodies and minds to recover from the exertions of the day, to save energy, and to allow children's brains to grow.

We need sleep for other basic biological functions including maintenance of our immune systems. Dreaming is thought to have many benefits; including helping us store memories and resolve emotional conflicts.

Poor sleep patterns, on the other hand, can lead to children becoming moody, listless and unresponsive, and in severe cases becoming overactive, and even aggressive. Children with chronic sleep problems may also become anxious and depressed.

Parents with regularly interrupted sleep; perhaps caused by a younger child with significant sleep difficulties, can become anxious and depressed, and this can affect their self-esteem and ability to cope with the demands of being an effective parent.

People who sleep well, and for as long as they need, will have a good sleep /wake rhythm. In children, this means sleeping at night and waking during the day. An awareness of our sleep/wake rhythms is the basis for understanding how we sleep, and what we can do to improve the length and quality of sleep.

From an early age the sleep/ wake rhythm has to be brought in line with the 24-hour day-night cycle. Most parents encourage their young children to sleep when it is dark and remain awake and alert when it is light. This allows everyone in the family to sleep well.

Our bodies help us to develop this pattern by creating a hormone called melatonin, which is produced in the dark and inhibited by bright light. Melatonin makes us feel drowsy, and helps with sending us off to sleep.

By the time children start school, the pattern of night sleeping and day waking should be well established, so they have a good night's rest and will be alert and active, and receptive to learning throughout the day.

In time, our bodies establish a regular sleep/waking routine, and we develop an internal 'body clock'. The production of melatonin becomes linked to our natural daylight waking and darkness sleeping patterns, and we thus establish ourselves and our children as regular and sound sleepers.

Dr Trevor Stevens, a UK behavioural psychologist and sleep specialist based in Oxford, supports families with children who have problems with sleeping.

He divides sleep difficulties into three areas - settling down to sleep, night waking and early rising. The problems with settling down are by far the most common. The doctor sees sleep as a habit, and like all habits can be learned. Bad sleep habits can also be unlearned, though some, like children sleeping in bed with their parents, can require a lot more work!

Dr Stevens helps parents understand that sleeping needs to be part of a personal and family routine. "I ask parents about all their family routines, including what happens at

mealtimes," he says.

"I often find that many children with poor sleep patterns have few fixed routines at home, and this is the first thing we need to establish. Children need regular mealtimes, and certainly should not be eating late in the evening. There should be at least a two-hour gap between eating and sleeping," says Dr Stevens.

Avoiding sugary foods, fizzy drinks and those containing caffeine helps children to achieve a relaxed state leading up to bedtime.

Many parents give their children milk before bedtime, in the belief that this will help them to relax. Dr Stevens discourages this in toddlers and older children. "Milk is a food. Our digestive system needs to become relatively inactive if we are to achieve deep sleep. Milk might help to settle children initially, but will stimulate the digestive system, leading to poor sleeping and possibly night waking."

Dr Stevens encourages the whole family to work at the settling process. "Younger children often feel they are missing out by going to bed, especially if older brothers and sisters are allowed to stay up later than them. The family can help by gradually winding down their activities in the evening," he said.

"Simple things like turning the TV off or its volume down, and putting a cushion over the phone, all give the young child signals that nothing exciting is going to happen once they have gone to bed. Adults can even think about talking quietly and slowing down their movements. This all adds to a feeling of calm before bedtime," Dr Stevens continued.

To help with the process of settling children before sleeping, Dr Stevens has produced a remarkable music CD. Called "And So To Sleep", it can induce a state of deep relaxation and sleep, and works for children and adults alike.

The 40-minute CD is a blend of soft music without words, based on lullabies and familiar songs about sleep, and revolves around a gently pulsating human heartbeat. Parents have found it invaluable as part of the settling routine. The Kimpton family, who live in Bangkok, have had disrupted sleep since their youngest son Oliver was born. Their response to the CD was one of relief and gratitude: "It worked like a dream. We are all sleeping so much better. It's lovely."

I hope that by understanding more about sleep teachers, who require as much quality sleep as the children they instruct, will also benefit from a good night's rest!

Michael Jones is an education consultant, an associate education advisor for the Village International Education Centre in the Ekamai area of Bangkok. He works with schools and parents, helping them support children with communication and other learning difficulties. He can be contacted via www.talk4meaning.co.uk or through the Village International Education Centre in Bangkok at www.village-education.com

Dr Trevor Stevens is a behavioural psychologist and musician, who works closely with parents, advising them on issues to do with their children's sleeping and eating habits and conditions. He can be contacted at Trevor@fishymusic.co.uk The CD 'And So To Sleep' is available from www.fishymusic.co.uk .