

It's 9.00am 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 be tempted to automatically blame parents for allowing their children to stay up late. However, a closer look is likely to reveal significant problems with sleeping that affect the whole family. Mainstream schools are increasingly taking the lead in supporting families with issues that affect children's wellbeing and learning, and assisting families to achieve a good night's sleep is as important as promoting healthy eating habits. Recent research into sleep disturbance in children with special needs throughout the UK shows a staggering percentage of families experiencing chronic sleep disruption. In many cases this has a negative impact on all family members' physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing, and a direct impact on children's ability to respond and learn in school.

A recent conference organised by the Handsel Trust, titled 'Sleep? What's that?' brought together parents and practitioners from across the UK to look at the extent of the problem of sleep disturbance in children with special needs, and to launch their research findings on the subject. A lot can be done, and is being done throughout the UK to help families achieve a good night's rest. Unfortunately sleep difficulties in children, and especially for those with physical and learning needs, is a neglected subject of study, with patchy provision of support.

Sleep is essential

Looking at how and why we sleep is the best place to start an examination of sleep problems and strategies to help. 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 to store memories and resolve emotional conflicts. (Stores and Wiggs, 2001).

Sleep/wake rhythms

People who sleep well, and for as long as they need, will have a good sleep /wake rhythm; which in children means sleeping at night and waking during the day. An understanding of our sleep/wake rhythms is the basis for understanding how we sleep, and crucially, 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 have established ourselves and our children as regular and sound sleepers. Children with poor sleep patterns, on the other hand, often become moody, listless and unresponsive, and in severe cases become overactive, and even aggressive. They may also become anxious and depressed. Parents with regularly interrupted sleep are also likely to suffer severe stress, affecting their self-esteem and ability to cope with the demands of being an effective parent.

Recent research

Research commissioned by the Handsel Trust (Cowdwell & Parrott, 2007) gives a stark indication of how many families with children with special needs are affected by chronic sleep disturbance. An in-depth look at their findings shows the extent of the problem, and helps us understand how behaviour and learning at school is affected. In their study of 375 families, 82% had children with some kind of sleep problem. Almost all of these families attributed their sleep disruption directly to their child's special needs. It is important to note that many of these children would like to sleep, but the consequences of their disability wakes them: including breathing difficulties and discomfort.

When the children failed to sleep, or woke in the night or early morning, they required a number of things, including 'containing', comfort, feeding, medication, monitoring, and 'technological interventions'. Over half of the parents in the study felt their relationship with their partner was 'vulnerable', (if it had not already completely broken down). Many families reported that brothers and sisters had also been significantly affected by sleep disruption.

Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are more likely to have sleep disturbance than any other group, though it is common in children with Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy and ADHD. Many children with severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour also find it difficult to sleep, and parents report extremely disruptive behaviour at night, affecting the whole family. Neighbours' sleep may also be disrupted. These findings concur, to a large extent, with those in the largest study of the lives of families with children with special needs (Emerson & Hatton, 2005). Parents cited their children's sleep problems as the main reason for their inability to cope. Many parents lost their jobs because they were unable to function adequately during the day, leading to financial difficulties and a downward spiral of debt and anxiety.

What can be done?

Dr Trevor Stevens, a behavioural psychologist and sleep specialist, based at Brookfields Special School in West Berkshire, heads a team of specialists who support families with children with behavioural difficulties, including sleeping. He divides sleep difficulties into three areas: settling down to sleep, night waking and early rising: with problems with settling being by far the most common. Trevor 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!

Trevor 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. 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.”

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. Trevor 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.”

Trevor 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. Simple things like turning the TV off or the 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”

To help with the process of settling children before sleeping, Trevor 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 heartbeat. Parents have found it invaluable as part of the settling routine. The Kimpton family, who have had disrupted sleep for several years said, “It worked like a dream. We are all sleeping so much better. It’s lovely.”

Patchy support

Trevor’s practical advice is echoed by sleep services throughout the country. Many families quickly sort their own problems out after receiving what seems to be basic sound advice. However there are a significant number of families who need specific, specialised support over a long period of time. These include children with complex medical conditions, who require medication or tube feeding during the night, or who may be very uncomfortable due to physical disabilities. Children with severe learning needs and challenging behaviour often have disrupted sleep, and may wake in the night and disturb the family; e.g. with screaming.

Unfortunately, specialist services are not available in all areas throughout the UK. Some specialist sleep services were represented at the Handsel Trust's conference, including those from St. Helens, Southampton and Scotland. 'Sleep Scotland', which began as a parent-led organisation, now offers services throughout the Scottish regions, including training for sleep counsellors. Looking at their map, with support for parents available throughout the country, makes one realise that much more needs to be done in the rest of the UK.

The role of the school

Should schools be involved, and what can be done to help? Dr. Penny Lacey, Senior Lecturer at Birmingham University's School of Education, is emphatic in her belief that all schools should have the willingness and ability to support families where children don't sleep well. She believes that schools should make time for teachers to liaise with support workers and parents, in order to provide coordinated support that will have an impact on the way children respond and learn at school.

Jill Roach, at Marjory Kinnon Special School in Hounslow, West London, is one teacher who is taking very practical steps to help all of the children in her class. Jill teaches a class of four and five year olds, several of whom have ASD. It was agreed that as part of her professional development she should arrange home visits for all the children in her class. It became clear that all the children needed support to enable them to have regular restful sleep. Jill is a firm believer that children need routines throughout their lives, and sleeping is one of these routines. "As schools are run on routines, and children with ASD respond particularly well to routine, teachers can be the best people to help parents set up routines at home. Our class uses a 'visual timetable', using pictures to show the children what will happen during the day. Children find this very reassuring, which helps to reduce their anxiety. This makes them more able to concentrate, cooperate and learn." Jill makes symbols for the parents to use at home, and naturally two of these symbols will be for 'time for bed' and 'time for sleep'.

Jill finds that the children are often tired and 'very grouchy' in the mornings. "They may have slept very badly and then have to get on the school bus as early as 7.45am, arriving at school at 9.00am. Their parents will have offered them breakfast, but the children may not have accepted anything to eat. They may have fallen asleep in the bus, breathing in stale air. No wonder they are not in a good frame of mind to join in and learn." Jill offers the children a drink and a healthy snack, and a calm and gentle start to the morning, to help them get used to being alert and responsive.

Brothers and sisters

We can't assume that it is only children with learning needs that have disrupted sleep. Many brothers and sisters are directly affected by a family member causing disturbance at night. Some children may have a regular role in supporting their sibling who has disrupted sleep during the night, and particularly if they share the same room. School staff need to be aware that

this might be the case, and need to be supportive if siblings are showing signs of tiredness or are not functioning well in school.

As part of my work as a storyteller, I perform a funny interactive story with groups of young children, called 'There's something under the bed!' It involves a father attempting to settle his two children to sleep, but he makes the children more active, and less likely to settle. I aim to encourage parents to watch the show, and afterwards explore effective ways of tackling their children's sleep problems. This works particularly well if the school has a Family Worker or Learning Mentor who can join in and do follow-up work. This is just one example of how schools can support parents and families to promote good sleeping patterns. Good, supportive relationships with parents are clearly important if schools are to be able to help, and knowing that there is a problem is the vital first step to offering support.

Michael Jones is an educational consultant, working with schools and parents, helping them support children with communication and other learning difficulties. He can be contacted via www.talk4meaning.co.uk

References

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Institute for Health Research, University of Lancaster
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MacKeith Press/Cambridge University Press

Useful contacts

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, toileting and eating. He can be contacted at trevor@fishymusic.co.uk

The CD 'And So To Sleep' is available from www.fishymusic.co.uk

Contact a Family have a useful sleep factsheet:
www.cafamily.org.uk/paptinfo.html

The Hansel Trust: www.hanseltrust.org

Sleep Scotland: www.sleepscotland.org