

Solutions Newsletter

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Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Mental Health and Sleep

Bears and other animals hibernate during this time of year, and some humans hoping to escape the winter doldrums might wish they could as well. Unfortunately, regardless of the time of year, it's quite the opposite. According to the CDC and the National Sleep Foundation, a third of American adults are chronically sleep deprived, and nearly two-thirds of 17-year-olds report sleeping fewer than 7 hours per night despite the recommended 8 to 10 hours that are needed.

Sleep difficulties are a common symptom of depression, and individuals who suffer with moderate to severe anxiety frequently report that their jittery bodies and worried minds keep them up at night. But the relationship between sleep and mental health goes both ways – that is, there is considerable evidence that the lack of sleep is not just the result of a mental health disorder, but also can create or worsen mental health symptoms.

Scientists are gathering more and more data about our need for sleep, and the effects of sleep deprivation on the brain. Sleep deprivation interferes with memory consolidation, that is, the conversion of memories from short term to long term memory. It slows down communication between brain cells, making complex tasks that involve multiple areas of the brain much more difficult. It also causes various areas of the brain to become hyper-sensitive, e.g., it affects the brain's rewards center, making us less capable of judging risks and rewards, and the amygdala, which helps us regulate our emotions.

Research has shown that sleep deprivation is associated with a higher risk for depression, anxiety, suicidality, and psychotic symptoms, and with cognitive problems such as disrupted memory and concentration that interfere with school performance. Poor sleep is also associated with impaired judgment and increased impulsivity, thus increasing the risk of behavioral problems, car accidents, and engaging in unsafe sexual practices.

Children and adolescents can be quick to discount the importance of sleep and busy parents may be weary of arguments over bedtimes and the use of electronic devices. But for both physical and mental health it is critical that your child gets enough sleep. Parents can help foster a child's good sleep habits by:

- Talking to your child about the risks of sleep deprivation and about sleep hygiene. School-based mental health counselors and pediatricians can provide handouts with sleep hygiene tips that are appropriate for children and

adolescents. Sleep hygiene involves things like waking up at about the same time every day – even on weekends – to regulate circadian rhythms; shutting off all screens at least 30' before bedtime; following a consistent bedtime routine that will signal the mind and body that it is time for sleep; avoiding foods or drinks with caffeine and heavy exercise within a few hours of bedtime, etc. No one can make another person fall asleep, but parents can set rules and boundaries that support sleep. [Sleep for Teenagers | Sleep Foundation](#)

- Seeking a school-based or community mental health assessment if your child has sleep difficulties or is reported by teachers to be chronically sleepy in class.
- Consulting your child's pediatrician to assess for medical problems that could contribute to sleep difficulties.
- Helping your child arrange his/her room to make distinct sleeping, working, and playing spaces. The bed, for example, should just be for sleep. Children who share a room can still be creative about setting up different zones (e.g., a desk or table for work, a floor area for play, the bed for sleep).
- Practicing what you preach! Children watch their parents to learn what is important – if you prioritize your own sleep, there is a better chance that your children will too.

Resources:

Blackwelder A, Hoskins M, Huber L. Effect of Inadequate Sleep on Frequent Mental Distress. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2021;18:200573. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd18.200573>

<https://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/need-sleep/whats-in-it-for-you/mood>

<https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2015/10/among-teens-sleep-deprivation-an-epidemic.html>

<https://www.bustle.com/p/how-sleep-deprivation-changes-your-brain-according-to-experts-17990663>

<https://healthmatters.nyp.org/get-better-nights-sleep/>