

Healthy Habits for Children and Families

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This month we'll examine nutrition, sleep and activity issues for children and youth with implications for home and school practices. Poor nutritional habits and inactivity lead to overweight children and subsequently to obesity. Obesity takes a huge toll on children's health. It can put them at increased risk for Type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, high cholesterol and other health problems. Today, about one-third of school age children and youth weigh too much. It is reported that half (51%) of obese teen-age girls and a third (37%) of teenage boys will be morbidly obese, 80 to 100 pounds overweight by age 30, the research shows.

Sleep

How much sleep do children and youth need? The amount a child needs depends on several factors, but reported guidelines for the ages of children include:

"There's more and more information showing insufficient sleep affects cognitive ability, and emotional and physical well-being," says Dennis Rosen at Children's Hospital in Boston.

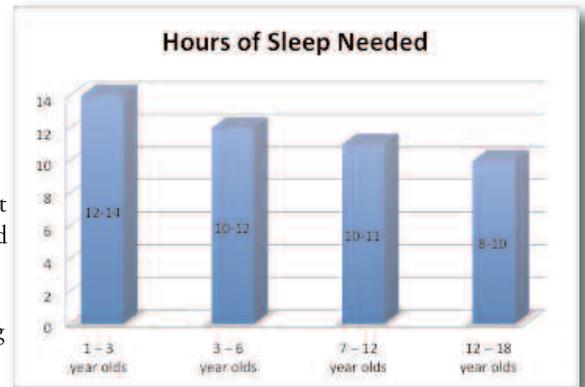
More than a third of elementary school-age kids and 40% of teenagers have significant sleep complaints, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

Experts are saying, "get the computer, TV and cell phone out of the bedroom." Light exposure from screens or anything lit up suppresses the release of melatonin, a hormone linked to circadian rhythms (affecting the timing of sleep). "Anything lit up is stimulating and delays your ability to fall asleep."

The majority of under-rested kids are simply going to bed too late and as a result do not concentrate well in school and cannot participate as well in class, sports and other activities. Some studies show that over the course of a week, high schoolers miss nearly 12 hours of needed sleep.

Many parents develop a pre-sleep routine for their children and youth, including a bath, reading, a light healthy snack. Essentially, a scheduled wind-down for the day is important for all elementary and high school children.

"Get the technology out of the bedroom. No TV, no cellphone, no computer. You really want it to be the place where they just sleep." – Nancy Collop, American Academy of Sleep Medicine



Physical Activity

Students at the elementary school level should engage in a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each week.

Students at the middle and high school level should engage in 225 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each week.

- Moderate physical activity: activity that results in an increase in breathing or heart rate (a few examples: walking briskly, dancing, swimming, jump-roping, bicycling on level terrain). This activity can take place during physical education class or extra curricular sports as well as at home during late afternoons and on weekends.
- Vigorous physical activity: activity that results in hard breathing or sweating (a few examples: jogging, high-impact aerobic dancing, swimming continuous laps or bicycling uphill). This activity can also take place in physical education class or extra curricular sports as well as during out-of-school time.

Physical education supports the link of movement and physical activity to increased student achievement. A well-developed curriculum of physical education provides motor learning for better cognition. "A student's physical movement, emotional, social and cognitive learning systems are interactive and interdependent. Proper development, enrichment, and remediation of these systems are critical to a child's ability to learn. For example, motor development provides the framework used to sequence the patterns needed for academic concepts like reading. The body's vestibular system interacts with the cerebellum to control balance, coordination, and spatial awareness. These systems turn thinking into action and facilitate the student's ability to place words and letters on a page. The four visual fields needed for eye tracking in reading are strengthened through navigation of space and crossing the brain and body midlines. Sensory components of balance, coordination, spatial awareness, directionality, and visual literacy are developed as the child rolls, creeps, crawls, spins, twirls, bounces, balances, walks, jumps, juggles, and supports his/her own weight in space. Locomotor movement crosses the brain and body's midlines to integrate and organize brain hemispheres. When students perform cross lateral activities, blood flow is increased in all parts of the brain making it more alert and energized for learning." - Jean Blaydes Madigan, Action Based Academics

Increasing physical activity to moderate and vigorous levels has many other important benefits including:

- Muscular strength and endurance
- Cardiovascular health
- Flexibility
- Balance and agility

6 Many of us were raised as "outside kids"; now we have many being raised as "inside kids" thus leading to the present concern of obesity caused by inadequate nutrition, limited physical activity and the related health issues of inadequate sleep.