Set Kids Up for Good Sleep

Since willing your child to nod off never seems to work, here’s what docs say you should be doing to make sure kids get enough zzz’s—essential for growing bodies and minds.

BY SARAH DIGIULIO

1. Think beyond bedtime
   The road to a good night’s sleep starts at breakfast. That’s right: Eating well is a cornerstone of having the kind of day that helps kids get to the right level of tiredness at night. Good nutrition gives them energy to be active—and being active makes little (and big!) bodies sleepy. Don’t be tempted to utterly wear them out, though: Overscheduled kids can be too revved up to wind down.

2. Do some math
   Bedtime consistency—even on the weekend!—is key, says Stephen Sheldon, D.O., director of the Sleep Medicine Center at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago. Figure out what time your child needs to wake up and work backward: Little kids need as much as 16 hours of sleep a day, and teens need eight to 10. Signs that your child isn’t sleeping enough include hyperactivity, moodiness, forgetfulness, and worsening grades.

3. Give the room a mini makeover
   An environment that’s quiet, dark, and cool promotes good sleep. If you can’t silence certain noises that might disturb or frighten your child—like traffic or train horns—playing soft music or using a sound machine can help, says Dr. Sheldon. Let your child pick out a sound he likes—it may not be the one you’d choose! If your child needs a night-light, make sure it’s a dim one with low wattage plugged into a low socket so it lights the floor rather than the walls or ceiling, he adds. And if you use time-outs, try to have your child sit somewhere else during them so he or she won’t have the same associations with being alone in the bedroom at night.

4. Be smart about snacks
   Kids may be more sensitive than adults to foods that disrupt sleep, like caffeine and items high in sugar or fat, especially when eaten late in the day, says Alon Avidan, M.D., director of the Sleep Disorders Center at UCLA. Too much food is a problem too: Our stomachs produce gastric acid to digest it, which can irritate the esophagus if we lie down soon afterward. If your child is hungry before bed, look for foods like turkey, milk, and cheese that contain the amino acid tryptophan, which gets converted into the sleep-promoting hormone melatonin. Or try a piece of whole-grain toast or a few nuts or whole-grain crackers; these all have fiber and protein, so they won’t cause blood sugar spikes.