

Night Life

Rob kids of sleep and you rob them of their health. Six-year-old Timothy begs to watch Detective Zack. “But mother, it’s only 30 minutes.” “O.K., but only tonight.” Next morning Tim is cranky. “I need more sleep.” “Lack of sleep is having disastrous consequences on children’s health. Up to 25 percent of U.S. children now suffer from sleep problems. . . Sleep-deprived kids often perform poorly in school and can be too erratic to maintain friendships.” *U.S. News & World Report*, Sept. 9, 2002.

What’s the solution? Make bedtime a priority. All children have two clocks — the alarm clock and a body clock. Sleep-deprived children are like adults struggling with jet lag. It interferes with everything — they feel irritable, can’t concentrate, and they are constantly yawning. Our body clocks run on a 24-hour schedule and it is daylight and dark that gives the body its clue to sleep. The problem is often weekends when the children go to sleep an hour or two later. This can reset the body clock. So keep to your sleep schedule irregardless of weekends.

Teen life can be hectic — chores, homework, band practice, football, and after-school jobs. What gives? Well, it is usually sleep that suffers. Most teenagers do not get enough sleep. They need 9 hours of sleep in order to function well during the day. Usually, they’re fortunate if they get between 7 and 7 ½ hours. Lack of sleep effects their moods, relationships, and grades. Again, the solution calls for order in scheduling. Sometimes, they need to eliminate something. Sit down with your teen and have a friendly talk. “Tom, I notice that you yawn a lot. I think you are suffering from sleep deprivation. It is so easy to put sleep on the back burner. Your body needs 8 to 9 hours of sleep to function well. When you sit up until midnight studying and then you are up at 6 a.m., you’re not going to function well. Something needs to change. I’ll make a deal with you. I will do your chores for one week until you can make changes in your schedule that will allow you more sleep. We’ll talk about this in a week.” “O.K., Dad.”

According to William Sears, M.D., “Most growth occurs during sleep.” *Parenting*, p. 119, May 2000. Parents should remember that healthy sleep habits are formed early in life. So, incorporate some predictability in your daily routine — meals, baths, story time, and ‘Good night’ kisses. Children thrive on routine. Create the right mood for sleep — a warm bath, a quiet house, dim lights in the bedroom. Dr. Sears says, “Think of healthy habits as a vaccine for life. As you teach your child how to make the choices that promote her well-being, you are

immunizing her against illness and accidents, and ensuring her a happy, healthy future.” *Ibid.*

I remember my mother’s bedtime stories to this day. I would crawl up on her lap and ask her for a story about her life on the farm when she was a little girl. My mother’s warm lap, her smiles, and ‘Good night’ kisses created contentment, security, and a mood for sleep. It is these bonding experiences that stay with us for a lifetime.

Harry, age four, hates bedtime. Every night it’s a battle. “Harry, it’s 7:30. I want you in bed all tucked in by 8 o’clock.” But Harry has mastered the delayed action technique. “No, I’m not sleepy.” “Harry, put away your crayons. It’s almost bedtime. So get your clothes off and let’s take your bath.” “But, Mama, I haven’t finished my picture.” He grabbed his crayons and defied her. “All right, Harry, hurry up!”

By 8:30 he is still in the tub. Harry has won again. Children have dozens of delay techniques — another drink, ‘I have to go to the bathroom’. Dr. Roudolf Dreikurs says, “Harry’s immediate goal is power. He displays his ability to do as he chooses and to engage Mother in a battle. He is fortified in his belief in his own power by Mother, who tries to impress him with her demands and then gives in. Harry should go to bed. However, Mother does not know how to induce him to go.” Dr. Dreikurs suggests: “Withdraw from the conflict situation.” *Children: the Challenge*, p. 156. Firmly, take Harry by the hand, lead him to the bathroom, take off his clothes, and put him in the tub. No talk — only firm action. He may kick and scream but go ahead with your routine. Put on his pajamas, kiss him ‘Good night’ and lead him by the hand to the bedroom. You can make temper tantrums futile by retreating from the conflict.

One family decided to have a “unplugged summer”— no television or computers were allowed after dinner. And everybody liked it: dinner time was at 6:15 sharp with candle- light and no phone calls. While the kids washed the dishes after their meal, the parents read to them. Mother said, “My kids are much happier.”

“Would it not be better, therefore, to break up this habit of turning night into day and the fresh hours of the morning into night? If the youth would form habits of regularity and order, they would improve in health, in spirits, in memory, and in disposition. It is the duty of all to observe strict rules in their habits of life. . . . The importance of regularity in the time for eating and sleeping should not be overlooked. Since the work of building up the body takes place during the hours of rest, it is essential, especially in youth, that sleep should be regular and abundant.” *Child Guidance*, pp. 112, 363.