

To Sleep, Perchance to Learn

By Diane Trautman

Another summer has flown by and it's time to start preparing for the next school year. One very important step is to re-establish bedtime schedules, to allow children to adjust their internal clocks and get into the right routine.

Experts at the National Sleep Foundation (www.sleepfoundation.org), tell us that preschool children need 11-13 hours of sleep each night, while elementary age children need 11 hours, and teens need a minimum of about 9 hours.

In a January 10, 2006 Washington Post article entitled "Schools Waking Up to Teens' Unique Sleep Needs," Valerie Strauss explores the unique issue of sleep deprivation in relation to teens: a rise in melatonin levels compels teens to stay awake later and to sleep later in the morning. However, with a schedule that includes 7 a.m. classes and demanding homework loads, many students can't strike the right balance. This is particularly problematic if the teen has access to media in their bedroom. Late night computer or cell phone chatting exacerbates the problem. Strauss quotes Stephen Sheldon, chief of sleep medicine at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago and an associate professor at Northwestern University: "Sleep deprivation can affect mood, performance, attention, learning, behavior and biological function."

Without adequate rest, our bodies may demonstrate symptoms of early onset diabetes due to our inability to successfully process glucose. Sleeping problems may also contribute to Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder. For teenagers, lack of sleep not only leads to learning, psychological and behavioral problems but can also create hazardous conditions on the road: teens cause more than half of all accidents attributed to sleepy drivers.

The NSF released results this year of its Sleep in America Poll.

Twenty-eight percent of teens reported falling asleep in class. Fourteen percent said they were late or missed class because they overslept. Meanwhile 34% of students who reported adequate sleep got better grades than their peers who were sleep deprived.

As parents, we need to help our children understand the vital role of sleep in their lives and guide them into making healthy choices. Among the suggestions from the National Sleep Foundation:

- Pay attention to your teen's caffeine consumption, napping and mood
- Help your teen to establish consistent sleep and wake schedules
- Set a good example – get enough sleep and talk to your teen about the importance of sleep
- Keep "sleep stealers" out of the bedroom – put the TV and computer in a common room instead of your teen's bedroom.