

Counselor's Corner
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The Number One Intervention for Better Sleep

Now that the school routine is established through in-person or distance learning, kids' sleep schedules are a priority to be addressed. To ensure success, students need to be alert and ready to learn throughout the instructional day. It often is hard to transition from summer to school sleep schedules, and with the lengthy break from structured schedules, it is more important than ever to establish healthy sleep habits.

One of the biggest distractions leading up to bedtime is screen time, whether it is by phone, tablet, computer, TV or gaming systems. Kids of all ages beg for ten more minutes, which become 20, then 30, and then arguments may erupt as a power struggle ensues to turn off the device and get to bed.

Sleep deficiency can impact brain development. Having a calm conversation about the science of sleep and brain development before broaching the idea of new sleep rules can be a great way of getting everyone on the same page regarding boundaries and limitations of screen time.

Researchers are understanding more about the incredible impact that sleep deprivation has on the developing brains of young people. The brain is still forming until approximately the age of 24. Dr. Judy Owens, director of sleep medicine at Boston Children's Hospital and a professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School, notes that the brain has a fascinating glymphatic system. She asserts that just like the body has the lymphatic system to clear out infections and other things that the body needs to eliminate, the brain has a glymphatic system that clears out toxins like harmful proteins that have accumulated. Dr. Owens says the key point is that scientists have found that the glymphatic system is primarily in action only when humans are in deep sleep. Given that over half of today's teens are chronically sleep-deprived, what does it mean for their developing brains to have more toxic proteins circulating during the day? Researchers still are learning about the glymphatic system and seeking the answer to that question and more.

In her studies of the adolescent brain, Dr. Adriana Galvan examined how sleep deprivation in teens impacts how the brain creates neuronal connections. Building brain connections is part of the rewiring of the brain that happens during adolescence. In one of her studies, Dr. Galvan found that teens who experienced more disrupted sleep than others were significantly more likely to show abnormal brain connection patterns.

One of the biggest causes of sleep disruption is having tech devices in bedrooms at night. Nearly 36% of teens report that they wake up at least once a night and check their phone. Several studies have shown that just having the phone in the bedroom at night turned off, even if the person says they do not check it, negatively impacts sleep duration.

This is the number one intervention that every family can try because it is so important for children's development: Removing accessibility to all screen devices at sleep time can greatly reduce sleep interruption, and foster a more relaxing environment in which healthy sleep can take place. The shift from summer to school this year is more challenging due to ongoing concerns and changes brought about by Covid-19, but ensuring that children get enough sleep so they can be ready for a productive day of school work is crucial. Decide on a set time that tech is off in the home, and stick to it as much as possible to control digital distraction.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics; Mayo Clinic; www.screenagersmovie.com