

Sleep Secrets

Regular readers of this blog know that I make a big deal about sleep. That's because I see lots of children with learning and behavior problems. Poor sleep is a major cause of these problems, and one that's often overlooked. The "sleep secrets" below aren't really secrets at all. They're simply useful facts. You probably know most of them already, but maybe one or two will be new.

- **Sleep need** -- Different children need different amounts of sleep, and the amount often changes with age. Teenagers often need more sleep than school-age children. If your child routinely sleeps till noon on the weekends, it means he's not getting enough sleep during the week. A good clue is if your child gets grumpier or more forgetful as the week progresses, which can be a sign that he is more and more overtired.
- **Sleep is a part of life** -- Small daytime problems often grow large at night. Examples include jealous feelings towards a sibling, worries about school or friends, even positive changes, such as a parent's new job. Nightmares are normal now and again. But a pattern of disrupted sleep might point to a more serious problem.
- **Sleep hygiene** -- The experts call healthy sleep habits "sleep hygiene." Better sleep hygiene solves many sleep problems. Key features of good sleep hygiene are:
 - getting to sleep at around the same time each night
 - falling asleep in a darkened room
 - having a relaxing bedtime routine, for example, bath, tooth brushing, stories, prayers
- **Bedtime TV** -- What's the most common cause of poor sleep hygiene? Yep, TV. People think TV helps children fall asleep. What it really does is keep them awake until they are so utterly exhausted that they can't possibly stay up a minute longer. Going to sleep overtired contributes to night terrors, nightmares, and bedwetting.
- **Snoring** -- Snoring can be a sign of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). In OSA, the airway becomes blocked off during deep sleep, making it impossible to breathe. In its most dramatic form, the person stops breathing for several seconds, then gasps for air. Other signs of OSA include sleeping in odd positions (for example, sitting up or with one's head bent way back), restless sleep, waking up sweaty or with a headache, and daytime sleepiness. Children with OSA often show "hyper" or "ADHD" behavior. Untreated sleep apnea can lead to school failure, and (if left untreated) to heart problems. OSA often runs in families. If any of this sounds like your child, or your partner, talk to a doctor.
- **ADHD** -- Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often have problems getting to sleep. Many of them tell me, "I can't fall asleep, because my brain keeps running too fast." It's important to treat the sleep problems along with the ADHD. Medication often helps, but good sleep hygiene is also important.

- **Bedwetting** -- If wetting starts up after a longish period of dryness, you have to think about bladder infections, diabetes, and other medical problems. A child who has never been consistently dry at night probably needs help learning that particular skill. Medication can help in the short run, but bed-wetting alarms and other non-medical treatments are safer, less expensive, and more effective for most children.

Credit – Robert Needlman, M.D.