

A good night's sleep helps a child make connections

Now that the holidays are over and the unique and exciting activities surrounding them have come and gone, it's a good time to help children get back into regular schedules.

Beyond getting rest and enjoying sweet dreams, children who get adequate sleep are using one of the simplest, most natural means of strengthening the connection between the hemispheres of their brains.

Children need a certain amount of sleep every night — nine to 11 hours, according to the Mayo Clinic. But perhaps more important, according to recent research, children need consistent bedtime routines to reap the cognitive benefits of rest.

Research out of University College London noted that children who have consistent bedtime routines and schedules display less challenging or disruptive behavior, are less cranky and irritable and are better able to focus and attend during the day, regardless of the amount they slept. The study also found that children whose sleep patterns were regular at age 5 showed better behavior than children whose sleep routines at age 7 became random.

In addition to benefits for the brain and for behavior, having regular bedtime routines and getting adequate sleep has positive impacts on children's health, including regulation of blood sugars and a decreased risk for childhood obesity.

Often, bedtime routines are cited by parents as one of the most challenging parenting experiences. However, learning routines is like learning any other skill for a young child — through repetition and practice, they can master the routine and benefit from a consistent sleep schedule.

It is helpful to break routines down into individual steps. For example, a bedtime routine could include donning pajamas, brushing teeth, choosing a book, having a story and snuggle time, then lights out with music, followed by 10-minute check-ins.

To help teach these routines to your child, use visuals (photos, clip art) so your child can understand the steps of the routine. This learning tool can increase your child's focus and can also help you follow the routine consistently. Building in special rituals (a favorite song, butterfly kisses) can make routines more personal, increase attachment and reinforce your relationship.

The benefits for your child don't end there. Connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain are strengthened in young children during sleep, sometimes by as much as 20 percent in just one night, according to a new study in the journal *Brain Sciences*.

This builds upon research published in the journal *Neuroscience* showing how sleep influences myelin production: Getting sleep seems to activate genes linked with myelin formation, while lack of sleep triggers genes linked with cell stress. The study holds powerful implications regarding children's brain development, cognitive growth and intellectual ability.

Bedtime routines don't have to be a battle. Bedtime can be a great time for parents and young children to bring closure to a day, to reflect upon the day's events and to enjoy nurturing time together. A story and a snuggle has benefits for young children and can be a great way for parents to end the day, too.

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