

Understanding Teen Sleep and Drowsy Kids

This is a brief summary of an article written by Dr Chris Seton, a paediatric and adolescent sleep physician in Sydney. A couple of staff from Student Services attended a conference recently where Chris and a collection of other professionals engaged in work with adolescents shared their knowledge, strategies and experiences.

Manocha, R. and Horváth, G. (2017). Nurturing young minds. Sydney, Australia: Hachette Australia.

Are you wondering whether your own child is sleep deprived? The two key sleep questions that will give you the answer are:

1. Does your teen have big weekend sleep-ins?
2. Is he/she difficult to wake up and get out of bed on school mornings?

If the answer to either or both of these questions is 'yes', then you have a sleep-deprived teen on your hands.

Adequate, good-quality sleep, healthy nutrition and regular exercise are the three pillars upon which health is optimised in adolescence. When these three factors are in place, teenagers are well protected from multiple physical and mental health problems. Additionally, resilient and good-quality sleep are important buffers against mood and learning problems.

As our 24/7 world becomes busier, and increasingly electronically connected, our opportunity to sleep decreases, and so sleep deprivation is becoming more common. The tiredness group by far is adolescents. In fact, 70 per cent of Australian teens are chronically sleepy.

The effects of sleep deprivation go way beyond simple tiredness, resulting in multiple physical and mental health problems. This long list of flow-on effects from sleep deprivation includes:

- Impaired classroom learning
- Mood and behavioural disturbances
- Increased risk-taking behaviours
- Emotional fragility
- Poor food choices
- Reduced sport performance
- Lowered self-esteem
- Poor coping with stress
- Reduced school attendance
- Increased alcohol and drug use
- More infections
- Elevated risk of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation

Why are adolescents so tired?

1. Too busy to sleep – time is needed for homework, socialising, meals, part-time jobs, sport, relaxation and down time. As these activities increase throughout high school years, and the time availability remains static at twenty-four hours per day, sleep time is shortened.
2. Typically in our society, school-night sleep reduces by 1.5 to 2 hours across adolescence. In distinct contrast, scientific research shows that teenagers require an average of nine hours.

3. Low mood – the combination of sleepiness, moodiness and stress is very toxic because each of these factors makes the other two factors worse.
4. Screens sabotage sleep – electronic screens cause sleep problems in four different ways. Firstly, device activity late at night, takes up time that could be otherwise used to sleep. Secondly, with repetitive in-bed screen exposure, the brain begins to get mixed messages about where and when to sleep, and then begins to associate the bed as a place of wakeful activity rather than a place of sleep. Thirdly, gaming and texting results in the release of wakeful and addictive neurochemicals like dopamine and adrenaline. Lastly, the blue light is a potent inhibitor of our sleep hormone, melatonin.

Impact on learning

Newly taught information is not absorbed if adequate sleep is not achieved on the night prior to any attempt at new learning. So a failure of short-term memory through tiredness means that classroom learning on one day is totally forgotten pretty much immediately.

The second arm of good learning involves long-term memory acquisition. This shift from short to long-term memory banks occurs on the night following a day of new learning. Many tired teens have inadequate amounts of dream sleep, and so the shift from short to long-term memory is compromised.

In summary, good quality learning on one day requires two consecutive nights of good sleep.

So let's get practical

- Sit down and have a chat with your teenager about the importance of sleep.
- Aim to forge an agreement on a sensible, regular, weeknight bedtime.
- Establish a pre-sleep routine e.g. a hot bath thirty to forty minutes before lights out.
- Retrain the brain. It simply is that bedtime and lights out occur at the same time.
- Avoid having digital devices in the bedroom. In order to limit these effects, devices should not be used in the hour before lights out, nor subsequently during the night. To avoid the temptation to use the device at night, the device should charge in a location away from the bedroom.