

UW Health: Consistent sleep critical to youth development in this unusual school year

Posted on Friday, Sep 18, 2020

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MADISON, Wis. – As children throughout Wisconsin return to a new school reality this fall, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health sleep experts encourage parents and students to establish healthy sleep habits.

Sleep is essential for both mental and physical health, and it is also something that both adults and kids seem to get too little of – even during the best of times, according to Stephanie Jones, assistant director, Institute for Sleep and Consciousness at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

Under conditions of stress, sleep is even more likely to get cut out, she said, but during periods of high-stress maintaining a healthy sleep routine is essential for cognitive and emotional well-being.

“Many kids, particularly teens and pre-teens, will spend the summer staying up late and sleeping late in the morning (or afternoon),” Jones said.

One-way parents can ease the challenges associated with the back-to-school transition, is to begin shifting kids back to a routine sleep schedule, she said.

Waking your child up 30 minutes to an hour earlier each morning, in the week before school starts, will make the morning routine during that first week of school much less jarring – for the entire family, she said. It will also mean that your child is fully awake and prepared to learn when school begins.

During virtual school, however, where class schedules might be inconsistent from day to day, keeping kids on a consistent sleep schedule is likely to be even more

challenging than usual, according to Jones.

“This type of schedule can easily lead to a child ‘sleeping-in’ until 10 a.m. on Wednesdays, for example, but needing to be up early again on Thursday,” Jones said. “When you sleep until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, going to bed at a reasonable time that night is near impossible.”

This kind of inconsistent pattern sets a child up for a pattern of ongoing sleep restriction, she said.

To help parents Jones recommends:

- The amount of sleep students need depends on their age, but most teens should still be getting around 9 hours of sleep a night.
- Keeping bedtimes and wake times consistent every day (even on the weekends).
- Having a pre-sleep, wind-down routine. Even for those kids who are too old for story time, having a consistent routine that includes a shower, or quiet reading, or listening to music in the hour before sleep is helpful.
- Turn off screens, including cell phones, an hour before sleep. If that’s not possible, have your kids download blue-light filters onto their devices. The light emitted from these devices has direct impact on the brain systems that control sleep, and blocking light will help a bit.

“We recognize it isn’t always easy for parents to guide their children into healthy sleep patterns, but like good nutrition, quality sleep is an essential part of healthy development,” she said.

For media: Jones is available for interviews today, and a recorded video interview is also available if needed.