

UW Health Kids: Consistent sleep critical to youth development in school

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MADISON, Wis. – As children get set to return to school in a few weeks, now is the time to establish healthy sleep habits.

Sleep is essential for both the mental and physical health of kids and adults, and it is also something that kids need to get the most out of school, according to Dr. Rachna Tiwari, pediatric sleep specialist, UW Health Kids, and clinical assistant professor, UW School of Medicine and Public Health.

“Teens and pre-teens especially, spend the summer months staying up late and getting up at different times every day, and it can be a challenge to get back into a regular sleep schedule,” Tiwari said.

This kind of inconsistency sets a child up for a pattern of not getting enough sleep, but parents can ease the challenges associated with the back-to-school transition by shifting kids back to a routine sleep schedule now several weeks before school starts, she said.

To adjust the schedule, parents can try sending kids to bed 15 minutes earlier than they had been going to bed during the summer, then waking them up 15 minutes earlier in the morning, adjusting wake-up and bedtime in 15 minutes increments every few days to reach the desired sleep schedule, Tiwari said.

“This 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.”

Adjusting to a new sleep schedule may be challenging for some kids, but if kids are not able to fall asleep after 20 minutes, try doing a quiet, relaxing activity before bedtime that is free from blue light, like that emitted from cell phone and TV screens, Tiwari said.

To help parents she recommends:

- Children 6 to 13 years old should get nine to 11 hours, while 14- to 17-year-olds should get eight to 10 hours, according to the National Sleep Foundation.
- Keeping bedtimes and wake times the same every day, even on the weekends.
- Even for those kids who are too old for a story before bed, having a consistent routine that could include a shower, quiet reading or listening to music in the hour before sleep is helpful.
- Turn off screens, including cell phones, TVs, computers, laptops and other electronics that emit blue light, one hour before going to sleep.
- Exercise regularly, limit or avoid napping, and avoid caffeine.
- Keep the bedroom dark and eliminate outside light. It is OK to use a night light.
- Maintain a cool temperature in the bedroom.
- Eliminate noises and keep the room quiet to help with distraction-free sleep. A white-noise machine or a fan can help with this.

“Starting to change these patterns now will go a long way to making kids’ sleep routines better during the school year and give your children more energy and focus during the school day,” Tiwari said.