**Are Late Bedtimes Bad for Kids?**

Hectic family routines are pushing kids' bedtimes back. Could it affect your child's health?

Staying Up Late

Here's a confession: My husband and I allow our sons, ages 4 and 5, to do something that many parents would consider as harmful as serving them candy bars and soda for dinner. We let them stay up late, every night.

Before you question why a terrible mother like me is permitted to write for a respected family magazine, let me hastily add that my boys, Cy and Jack, aren't yet in school full-time. So even though they're wriggling into their Batman pajamas and snuggling up for a story just before 10:30 P.M., they can -- and do -- sleep late each morning. Altogether they get 10 or 11 hours of shut-eye a night, which, experts say, is about right for children their age. Their bedtimes fit our household schedule. My husband gets home from work late, we eat dinner late, we play late, and so on throughout the evening.

Some of my friends and relatives have tactfully questioned whether such a late bedtime is good for small children. I typically respond by saying my kids seem fine -- goodness knows, no one ever complains that they lack energy. Still, the persistent questioning (with its undertone of disapproval) left me wondering: Could my sons be suffering any harm? To find some answers, I turned to the country's leading experts on children's sleep habits.

I found that most sleep specialists, not surprisingly, are unenthusiastic about late bedtimes. As several pointed out, this schedule is toughest on Mom and Dad. "In most families, parents just aren't going to have the energy to deal with a 3-year-old at 10:00 P.M.," says Judith Owens, M.D., director of the Pediatric Sleep Disorders Clinic at Hasbro Children's Hospital, in Providence. "Parents need time to themselves."

Still, I persisted: My husband and I get our private time over coffee and the morning newspaper instead of at night. If that's okay with us, is it okay for the kids? Well . . . as Dr. Owens and most of the others hesitantly allow, there's probably nothing intrinsically harmful about letting kids stay up late, provided -- and this is the crucial part -- that they go to bed about the same time every night and get enough sleep overall. As Dr. Owens explains in a more clinical way: "The duration and the regularity of the sleep-wake cycle are the most important factors in a child's having a quality, restful sleep."

A Nation of Night Owls

Once kids begin to wake up early for day care, school, or other activities, late bedtimes can lead to insufficient sleep. Kids, like adults, can't function properly when they're tired; they become cranky and inattentive. "Lack of sleep can have really devastating consequences on the child's mood and performance," Dr. Owens says. It can also tax the body, causing stress that stunts proper physical growth.

My family is hardly the only one burning the midnight oil. "I can't tell you how many families I hear about with little ones up until 10:00 or 11:00 at night," says Jodi Mindell, Ph.D., director of behavioral pediatrics of the Sleep Disorders Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and author of *Sleeping Through the Night: How Infants, Toddlers and Their Parents Can Get a Good Night's Sleep* (HarperCollins, 1997). In many homes, hectic family schedules and the reluctance of late-working parents to pack their kids off to bed early are driving the longer days. In other households, sheer parental exhaustion is allowing kids to win the sleep time skirmishes.

And, unlike mine, most households don't have the luxury of leisurely mornings. The result, recent research suggests, is an abundance of drowsy kids. In a study by the National Sleep Foundation, 60 percent of children under 18 complained of feeling tired during the day, and 15 percent reported falling asleep in school. A Brown University study of 500 children in kindergarten through fourth grade found that more than a third of them had sleep-related problems.

It's not always easy to tell whether your child is getting enough sleep, experts say. Tired kids don't necessarily act tired, according to Dr. Mindell. On the contrary, as they struggle against their urge to snooze, they may become overactive.

One clue that a child isn't sleeping enough, Dr. Mindell says, is that he constantly conks out in the car even on short trips. Eye rubbing, irritability, and aggressive behavior are other tip-offs. A child who needs a lot of prodding to start moving in the morning may be hitting the hay too late.

But the fact that a child gets up on her own isn't necessarily a sign that she's fully rested. "We have very, very strong internal clocks," Dr. Mindell points out. "Some children will wake up at a certain hour no matter what time they go to bed."

Sleep deprivation, paradoxically, can lead to restless sleep and to a child's rising too early. In fact, when parents complain to Dr. Mindell that their child is up with the birds, she routinely advises them to try putting the child to bed earlier. Often, she says, this step helps the child snooze more soundly and stay in bed longer.

Nocturnal by Nature?

If your child seems particularly comfortable keeping late hours, the reasons may run deeper than your household habits. Mary Carskadon, Ph.D., director of the Chronobiology and Sleep Research Laboratory at Bradley Hospital, in Providence, has studied the habits of late-sleeping "night owls" and early-rising "larks" among teenagers. Dr. Carskadon says that younger kids, too, tend toward one schedule or the other. Research suggests that our individual preference for early or late sleep patterns may be partly rooted in our genes, but our environment and age also influence them. (Teenagers are generally more night-owlish than others.)

To tell whether your child has a preference, ask yourself: Does she conk out early, no matter what's going on? Does she seem more energetic and cheerful at certain hours? Even if your child's inner clock seems naturally geared toward later hours, think carefully before you accommodate her preference. Eventually, she'll have to conform to a morning schedule.

If your child has extreme issues falling asleep and can’t seem to get on a pattern, ask your pediatrician if a sleep supplement like Melatonin could help. Starting at age 4, kids can take melatonin gummies like [Vicks PURE Zzzs Kidz](https://vicks.com/en-us/shop-products/zzzquil-sleep-aid/zzzquil-pure-zzzs-kidz-melatonin-gummies) that are non-habit forming and contain a blend of Melatonin and botanicals like Lavender and Chamomile.

Admittedly, my own sons, who attend day-care centers part-time, have already encountered their share of conflicts. They've missed a few early-morning field trips, and they aren't especially tired at naptime. After Cy starts school full-time, we realize, we'll have to abandon our schedule, because we want the boys to continue getting enough sleep.

Some experts say the sooner children make the shift, the better. "The longer this pattern goes on, the more difficulty you'll have changing it," cautions Robert Doekel, M.D., a Birmingham, Alabama, sleep specialist. But others suggest it's all right to postpone the adjustment, as long as you do it gradually. If your child is used to turning in at 10:00 P.M., don't wait until the night before the first day of school to enforce an 8:00 P.M. lights out.

And once they do start getting up early, don't let all the attraction and distraction of modern family life keep them up late. Turn off the lights, pull up the covers, and tuck them in for their ten-plus hours of z's.

For kids (and for everyone else, actually), sleep is not just beauty rest; it promotes energy, wellness, learning, good moods, and peaceful households. "If kids don't get enough sleep," Dr. Carskadon says, "it affects the whole family's quality of life."

Earlier to Bed

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children ages 2 to 3 should get 9 to 13 hours of sleep each night, kids ages 3 to 5 should sleep 10 to 12 hours, and those ages 5 to 12 should sleep at least 8. If your child has to get up early in the morning or you want to give him an earlier bedtime for your own peace of mind, here are tips for making the shift:

* Push back your child's bedtime by no more than 15 minutes a day -- or, better, by 15 minutes every two to three days.
* Manipulate your child's exposure to light, which experts say affects the hormones that control our internal clock. To help nudge an internal clock backward, aim for lots of bright light in the morning. Activity and natural light help too. So head to the playground after breakfast. At the other end, dim the lamps as it gets closer to bedtime.
* Avoid stimulating activities before bedtime, including rowdy play, television watching, and video-game use. Substitute quiet, soothing rituals: a warm glass of milk, a bath, a bedtime story.

By **Katy Read**

Published on *Parents.com* – October 2019