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8 tips for teen sleep

Parents can help their high school students get more shuteye

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By Joe Miller
Correspondent

Posted: Monday, Oct. 31, 2011

It's midnight on a school night! you yell at your teen. You need to go to bed!

But I'm not tired, your wide-awake student protests.

As it turns out, kids who say they aren't tired have science on their side.

"There are certain times of day when teens are most alert," says Dr. Tracey Marks, an Atlanta psychiatrist and author of "Master Your Sleep: Proven Methods Simplified." Attribute this to a circadian clock driven in large part by the hormonal explosion common during the teenage years.

"They have a dip in late afternoon," says Marks, "but experience a late-day surge that takes them through 9 or 10 o'clock."

"They open that sail and ride that wind," she adds. "They really can't get to sleep."

Quick math explains the problem: Research on various fronts says teens need 8 1/2 to 9 1/4 hours of sleep every night. But the majority of high school students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools need to be to school by 7:30. And going to bed after 11 and getting up at 6 a.m. or earlier yields just less than seven hours of sleep.

Furthermore, a new study by the federal government this fall confirmed most teens don't get enough sleep, putting them at higher risk for unhealthy behaviors.

What are teens - and their parents - to do?

1 Determine individual sleep needs. Some need more sleep, some less. Susan KuczmarSKI, author of "The Sacred Flight of the Teenager: A Parent's Guide to Stepping Back and Letting Go," says a good first step in determining a teen's specific sleep needs is to have them keep a sleep journal.

"Get them to record when they went to bed, when they got up, how much sleep they got and how they felt when they got up," says KuczmarSKI. Basically, if they get up before the alarm goes off, they've gotten enough sleep; if they repeatedly slap the snooze button, they need more sack time. Marks suggests conducting this experiment over several days during vacation, when you don't have to wake by a certain time.



Listening to low key music before bed can help teens wind down at night. Katie Miller

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2 Tinker with time. Once you determine how much sleep your teen needs, do a back-out sleep. If he does best on nine hours and needs to be up by 6:30 a.m., he needs to get to bed by 9:30 p.m. Part of what's keeping him up past 11 is that circadian clock, set by daylight. Marks is a fan of tricking Mother Nature by using a light box, a device that replicates the blue light of sunlight, frequently prescribed to treat Seasonal Affective Disorder. Turn on the light for 15 to 30 minutes every morning when you wake up, she says, and the body will adjust. Warning: The lights can run well over \$100.

3 An exercised body is a tired body. Get your teen to exercise after school. "Exercise promotes sleep," says Kuczumarski. "It relaxes the body." But don't let them exercise within an hour of bedtime; exercise stimulates the body.

4 Wind down before bed. No cellphones, no computers, no TV within an hour of bedtime. The light emitted by these devices can be stimulating, says Marks. "We need a mental wind-down period," she says. Read a book (textbooks are often effective sedatives), meditate, listen to low key music.

5 Quantity vs. quality. Staying in bed for nine hours is good only if it's a quality nine hours - that is, the restful sleep that lets the brain run its gamut of restorative phases. To that end: avoid caffeine and energy drinks, especially a few hours before bedtime.

6 Lobby for the benefits of sleep. Make your kids understand why adequate sleep is a good idea. Lack of sleep can lead to inattention and thus, poor grades; affect performance in sports; cause weight gain; contribute to acne and other skin problems, just to name a few things.

It can even inhibit physical and emotional development and cause some teens to be "late bloomer," according to Dr. Jacob Tietlebaum, author of "From Fatigued to Fantastic!"

7 Cut 'em some slack. "Let your kids get a couple of extra hours of sleep on the weekends," suggests Kuczumarski. A couple hours, she emphasizes - "Not sleeping in until 1 in the afternoon."


8 If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Getting enough sleep is all good and well, says Tietlebaum, but parents need to remember that teens are "adults in training" - they need to figure out what works on their own. Present them with the facts, provide suggestions for what they can do, but let them make the decisions. "Ask them the question, 'How's that working for you?'"


"If they're getting good grades, or they're not getting into trouble," says Tietlebaum, "leave them alone."

Joe Miller writes about health and fitness in North Carolina. Read his blog at www.GetGoingNC.com, where you can also find more information about teens and sleep.

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