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Why Your Kids Can't Sleep, and How to Help

PUBLISHED JUNE 26, 2020

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Most parents crave a quiet evening after a long day, especially in these emotionally charged times. The irony, of course, is that this simple pleasure may seem more elusive than ever before. Just as we settle into our couches, TV remotes in hand, our hard-won quiet time is inevitably cut short by a persistent little voice calling out, "I can't sleep!"

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) estimates that 15% to 25% of kids and teens struggle to fall asleep or to stay asleep on a regular basis, and these issues may be even more pronounced now. Months after the COVID-19 pandemic began, life is still far from normal, and, to the chagrin of us parents, our kids' bedtimes can often feel like a chaotic battle. We spoke with experts to understand why kids may be having so much trouble falling asleep, and to find out what we can do about it.

Why kids can't sleep

Even if your family is lucky enough to not be affected directly by job loss, illness, or worse, it can sometimes feel as if the world is spinning out of control. And although parents may try to shield their children from their own worries, kids can often sense that things aren't right, and that can make them feel uneasy. "Children pick up on the anxiety of their parents," says David J. Schonfeld, MD, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. They may have their own worries and disappointments too, he says, whether it's missing their grandparents, whom they may not have seen for a while, or not being able to play the sport that (in their mind) defines them.

What does anxiety have to do with sleep? Schonfeld says that high levels of stress raise levels of the hormone cortisol. That surge can knock out of kilter the typical ebb and flow of hormones and chemicals that help dictate your sleep-wake cycle. Babies, toddlers, and some school-aged children may not know whether or not they're anxious, but they may respond to general unease by wanting to have their parents nearby. "This intensified craving for their parents' comfort carries over into the sleep window," says Lisa Medalie, PsyD, a behavioral sleep medicine specialist at UChicago Medicine who developed DrLullaby, an app to help kids sleep. Anxious older kids might ruminate over what's worrying them, which also makes it hard to fall asleep.

Beyond stress, disruptions in our usual routines can steal away sleep, too. As mundane as it sounds, a routine provides a framework for our lives. When crucial pieces of our schedules disappear or shift, the larger whole is prone to falling apart. Later start times for school or day care (or no school at all), the cancellation of camps, the infiltration of screen time into playdate time (or, let's be real, any time), the disappearance of rules because parents are too exhausted to enforce them—these things affect the usual rhythms of the day and can ultimately wreak havoc at night.

In addition to helping kids feel safe and comfortable, "[C]onsistent bedtimes and wake times are essential components for maintaining optimal sleep," says Medalie, who in her practice has seen a significant uptick in insomnia complaints from kids and adults. And, of course, good sleep (at least 10 hours for kids ages 3 to 5, and at least nine hours for kids ages 6 to 12) makes for a happier, healthier child (PDF).

How to help kids fall asleep

Melatonin (a sleep supplement) for kids has become quite popular in recent years, and sales shot up by 98% in May 2020 compared with May 2019, according to in-house research from Spins, a wellness-focused data-tech firm. But it can be tough to know what's inside your bottle. Because melatonin is a supplement, the Food and Drug Administration doesn't regulate its safety and efficacy. Plus, there are possible known side effects to giving your kids melatonin, like headaches and bed-wetting.

Behavioral interventions for sleep remain by far the safest treatments over the long term for most children, says Medalie (though, of course, if anxiety and insomnia persist, talk to your pediatrician or contact a pediatric sleep specialist). For the best chance of success, model the desired behavior. For example, if you want kids to unglue themselves from the phone at night, unglue yourself too. And instead of dictating rules, offer options. Giving children some say in the matter goes a long way toward motivating them to follow through.

As these strategies suggest, a better night's sleep depends as much on what you do during the day as on what you do at night:

Establish a schedule. Falling asleep at a designated time is tough when no other activity has a designated time. So sit down as a family and agree on a realistic timetable for a typical day—wake-up, breakfast, work or playtime, outdoor walks, and so on. Don't forget the crucial end-of-day rituals, like dinner, bath time, story time, and bedtime. This will help kids sleep by "creating a sense of order to the day that offers reassurance in an uncertain time," says Carol L. Rosen, MD, a pediatric sleep medicine specialist at University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center, and a professor of pediatrics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Post your schedule on the fridge as a daily reminder.

Get outside, preferably in the morning. Stepping into the sunshine (or, at the very least, poking your head out the window) soon after you rise

signals to your circadian clock that it's time to wake up. Walking outside, even on a gray day, will jump-start your clock better than if you stayed in, says Rosen. Stroll with your child, bring their crafts outdoors, play a quick round of hopscotch, or entice them with bubbles, yard games, or a cheap inflatable pool. Even better, savor the greenery around you—smell the flowers in the park, grow an herb garden, or listen to the birds in your backyard. Immersing the senses in nature during the day can offer a sense of calm. And, in turn, if worry is the culprit behind your child's tossing and turning, it might help improve sleep at night, too.

Insist on exercise. The more time kids spend engaging in physical activity, the likelier they are to fall asleep more quickly. Moderate activity (such as walking) has also been associated with better-quality sleep for both adults and children. But with sports activities cancelled or made less enticing because of mask requirements, kids are moving far less than they typically would. If following along with online exercise videos (many are free) is a hard sell for your kids, Gregory Chertok, a New York City–based certified mental performance consultant with Telos Sport Psychology Coaching, suggests expanding your view of exercise for little ones to include gardening, dancing, or playing games like Twister. As for older kids, let them decide on goals (for instance, how many push-ups can you do by the end of the week? How long can you stand on one foot while brushing your teeth?), and encourage them to invite friends to join in. If you can, get outside (see above)—a walk or water-gun fight counts as exercise too, at any age. Whatever you decide, keep activity consistent and make it part of your new routine, says Chertok.

Ban screen time just before bed. Even though the AAP has relaxed its stance on screen time for now, it's not exactly meant to be a free-for-all, especially at night. The light emitted by gadgets suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin, and children are particularly sensitive to its effects. (A small study in 2018 found that melatonin levels in preschoolers plunged by 88% for 50 minutes after exposure to a screen.) At the very least, ban phones and tablets from the bedroom at night, then work at curbing phone and tablet use an hour before bed. And instead of telling kids to spend less time playing video games, invite them to spend more time doing something else—something quiet, like reading, crafting, building puzzles or Lego sets, playing board games, or (what a concept) having a conversation.

It's crucial to ask your kids what they prefer, says Rachel Busman, PsyD, senior director of the Anxiety Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute in New York City. For tough customers, she suggests opening a Pinterest page like this one, with literally hundreds of activity options, and saying, "Pick just one thing." If you can, do the activity together. (Our kids to-do list includes many non-screen options, too.)

Be open about your fears. Trying to keep the upsetting news a secret from your child will likely backfire. They're bound to find out what's going on anyway, whether it's by hearing it on the news or during a Zoom call. If children have questions that are keeping them awake at night (or any questions, for that matter), respond at an age-appropriate level, says Schonfeld. For instance, you might tell your kindergartner, "Yes, people have gotten sick, but most are older people, and children your age are less likely to get sick." When you're genuine and reassuring, and you answer questions and teach children coping techniques, they're not left to deal with their thoughts alone, Schonfeld says.

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles has put together resources for parents and educators on how to talk to children about concerns arising from the pandemic. And the AAP has advice for how to handle questions your child may have about the Black Lives Matter protests; for younger children, you can also take a cue from Elmo's dad (video).

Make your child's room conducive to sleep. That means dark, cool, and quiet. If your child is scared of the dark, a night-light is okay (a favorite in our guide to how we get our kids to sleep is the glow of a **flameless candle**). Be mindful of noises permeating into your child's room; you can mask outside noises with a white noise machine. (Calm, our also-great pick for the best meditation app, has been offering sleep music options as well as meditations for kids and adults on its site, not in the app.) If outdoor traffic lights or signs penetrate the room, consider blackout shades.

Listen to those "I can't sleep because" grievances. This doesn't mean giving in to demands. It just means acknowledging that your child's feelings are real. "When you're stressed, your body is on high alert, and everything feels heightened, so it's natural for kids to have physical complaints," says Busman. Avoid saying, "How can you be hungry? You ate a big dinner! I'm not going to make you a grilled cheese sandwich at 11 at night!" Instead, simply say, "You feel hungry. That's frustrating." This is

not the time to reason with a child; keep the response "short and sweet," Busman explains. Then offer something reassuring, which is what your child is looking for anyway. For instance: "The kitchen is closed right now, but let's get you some water, and I'll rub your back."

Teach your child to do some deep breathing. Meditation can quiet the mind, diffuse anxiety, and help you sleep. But have you ever tried to meditate with a 7-year-old? Instead, simply lie down next to your child and start taking deep breaths, and your child will probably follow, says Busman. To make deep breathing more kid-friendly, think of a favorite category with your child, such as ice-cream flavors. Inhale deeply and exhale slowly together, but take turns saying a flavor on the exhale ("chocolate ... strawberry ..."). Practice during the day, so children will eventually feel comfortable doing it themselves in bed.

Help kids stay in their own room. It's natural for kids to want to sleep with their parents when they're anxious. But unless co-sleeping is part of your typical arrangement, it's best for them to stay in their own bedrooms. Be gently firm and consistent. Say, "We each sleep in our own bed," but offer to read another book and cuddle on the couch, says Schonfeld. Assure them that you'll check on them every few minutes (but gradually draw out the time between visits). Creativity also helps: In a Tiny Victories submission featured in a recent edition of The New York Times Parenting newsletter, a mom said she'd managed to calm her 5-year-old after a nightmare by hugging and kissing her child's pillow and saying she "filled it with 'mommy love.'" The next morning, her daughter woke up and reported brightly, "It worked!"

Further reading

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